

小野不由美

屍鬼

SHIKI



新潮文庫

Shiki
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by Fuyumi Ono

Novel Updates

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Chapter 1

Part 1

On the very day Gotouda Fuki's funeral services ended, Seishin slipped from the graveyard to pay a visit to the Ozaki clinic. The lights were out in the waiting room. Instead, the light in the window facing the courtyard was lit. On the first floor of the main house, the nearest window was Toshio's bedroom.

Maneuvering around the garden trees, avoiding the shrubbery, he went into the yard. Through the lace curtains he could see Toshio's room which he had become used to coming and going from. It was a western style room that was once a parlor. Toshio's bedroom was moved from a room on the second floor to this one sometime during grade school, wasn't it? It was many times larger than his bedroom on the second floor had been it it seemed like Toshio had some lingering affection for the second story. --Indeed, the move wasn't Toshio's will. The reason for why Takae suddenly moved Toshio's room to there, Seishin understood immediately even as a child. Even that night night feeling a pang of guilt that he'd harbored since then, Seishin tapped on the glass. Toshio, sitting back on the bed, looked up and jerked his chin in a motion for him to enter.

"---Yo."

The room was jumbled, a collection of Toshio's life history gathered within. The bed that hadn't been moved once since he was a child, a writing desk. The books on the shelves changed from reference books to medical journals, the contents of his lowboard went from idle collectables and records to bottles of western liquor but as the change was gradual, it didn't feel uncomfortable.

"Want a drink?"

Toshio motioned lightly to his glass, then opened the refrigerator, only household good he'd gained since succeeding the house. Without waiting for Seishin's response, he put ice into an extra glass.

"---And? What's up."

Toshio's voice as he poured the liquor and added water was oozing with an air

of nonchalance. Seishin hesitated to speak, and for a while, without a word, he looked troubled at his glass. Toshio made a deliberately calm face, turning his eyes with disinterest towards the program on TV as he lit a cigarette.

"...Hey, what's happening in the village?"

"What do you mean what?"

"Shuuji-san, the three in Yamairi, Megumi-chan, Giichi-san, Fuki-san. ---For a single summer, don't you think that's too many dead?"

Toshio's voice was blunt. "Last summer there were four people. Who died. If we're talking about what's too many, it's probably about three. In the summer old people's bodies give out. Even more if they're older with a chronic disease. The heat this year's been harsher than usual, too."

"That's not what I'm saying." How many people died last summer, or even the year before that, couldn't be unknown information to Seishin who was none other than a monk. "Certainly, there are plenty of older people in the village like Gigorou-san who are in bad condition. There's no lack of bedridden elders like Giichi-san, either. Those elderly dying may be ordinary enough for the year. But how many like Shuuji-san die in the prime of their life? Accidents aside, from illness?"

Toshio's voice as he responded was unnecessarily flippant.

"Shuuji-san's at the right age for adult diseases. Malignant tumors, heart failure, cerebral hemorrhages, the so called sudden death, suddenly dying off isn't something unheard of."

"Then, Megumi-chan? --Of course, it's not unheard for for someone young to suddenly die of a disease. That's been what's happening and will likely be what keeps happening But, it's been at most half a month that we've had this many in a row. Is this what you would call common?"

Fuki-san, too, was at the age where something happening at any time wouldn't be strange. She herself was aware of that and had made voluntary arrangements for her own burial plot. For Fuki-san, if she only died after a quick striking illness, that might have really been a good thing. There isn't anything especially strange. --But, only half a month before that, her son died. A healthy

middle aged man in the prime of his life, with a sound body, and without any particular chronic illnesses. He suddenly died, and half a month later his mother suddenly dies. Both without time for hospitalization, true sudden death. Is that something that happens a lot?"

"It's not like it's impossible, is it? With her son dead, an old aged mother'd be heartbroken."

"And if before her son died, her blood brother died?"

Seishin stared at Toshio, Toshio intentionally keeping watch over the TV.

"The Murasako's Hidemasa, too, was at an age where something happening wouldn't be strange. If Hidemasa-san alone had suddenly died, even I wouldn't have any doubts about it. The same for Gigorou-san, and the same for Mieko-san. But three people did, ---and on top of that, three people who lived in the same community, all died at once? Directly after that, his nephew in the prime of his life suddenly died, and half a month later his sister died. Each and every one of them were without the immediate care of a physician, without knowing if anything was wrong with any of them anywhere, without treatment or rest, just the sudden conclusion. Are you going to tell me that those are ordinary circumstances?"

Toshio didn't answer. As if bothered by the smoke from his own cigarette, he only furrowed his brows.

"As separate cases, indeed, there isn't anything suspicious. Elders die often enough, and it isn't unheard of for the young to die suddenly. Each one alone, or even if there were only two, could be thought of like that. But, when the numbers come out to this much, and in a row. Isn't there a meaning to it if they're serialized?"

"What are you saying it means?"

"....it isn't a plague, is it?"

At Seishin's inquiry, Toshio's gaze tore from the TV as he turned to face Seishin. He pushed his cigarette into the ash tray.

"That's an old style way of saying it." With a faint smile, he turned down the volume on the TV and brought out a stack of documents from beneath the low

table. He placed them on top of the table. "Indeed, there have been a lot have deaths this summer."

Toshio folded his hands over the documents.

"Even taking into account how many old people there are and the heat, it's abnormal. Within about half a month, seven people, just out of the ones I know, are dead. Ohkawa Gigorou, Murasako Hidemasa, Murasako Mieko, Gotouda Shuuji, Shimizu Megumi, Yasumori Giichi, Gotouda Fuki, ---in short, seven people."

Seishin nodded.

"Last year all year how many deaths do you think there were? Our of just the people I know, it's eight. Five I wrote out death certificates for, the other three were transferred to the hospital in Mizobe and a report came in to me of their deaths. There may be more deaths I didn't have any business with, but at most there were as few as ten deaths or about. Even if we have a few more old people than the national regional average, that was the situation last year. Regardless of that, this August, and just in half of that month, we've already had a death count vigorously approaching one year's. Just the rise in numbers is abnormal. This isn't a normal situation."

"....Aa."

"It's not just a problem of numbers. I don't know Shuuji-san's cause of death. I wrote acute heart failure down at face value but if you say it honestly, it's cause of death unknown. Same for Gigorou-san, same for Hidemasa-san. Megumi-chan. Fuki-san. Five people died suddenly, and we're not very clear on that cause of death. For Mieko baa-san, there was a police autopsy but after all it was hard to say a precise cause. If you want one you could say there's nothing suspicious about, Giichi-san would be about it." Toshio lightly tapped the stack of documents. "No matter how you think about it, it's abnormal. And Shuuji-san is Hidemasa-san's nephew. Fuki-san was Shuuji-san's mother. The three in Yamairi were living together like a family. Of the six people who met with an unclear death, the only one without a connection to the other dead is Megumi, otherwise all of them had a close connection with each other. This undefinable death sparks off to people nearby. Indeed---I can only think of it as contagious."

Seishin exhaled deeply. It was a strain holding onto unease as nothing more than unease. Indeed it was true that it was a relief to have it make opaque but having it clarified like this meant the worst for the village.

"If it's an epidemic, it's a serious matter."

The people of the village had intimate connections, complicated like a meshed net. And the drainage system was far from complete. Kanemasa had been a backer and there was supplementary assistance from the city towards establishing a septic system but some portion of water for daily living even now was drawn from the river. Even with a waterworks system established, many villagers still used underground water in some form or another, and in the mountains, people drew drinking water from the swamp. But, in the mountains that encircled the village, there were spatterings of graveyards about. Even now the dead were buried there.

Seishin pointed that out, and Toshio lightly shook his head.

"If it's an epidemic. --But, that's not for sure yet."

"But."

"Don't rush ahead of yourself," Toshio said in a low, flat tone. "It's not good to make predictions. Things being what they are, if we embrace any weird predictions, there's the serious possibility it'll slow us down on grasping what the real situation is."

"Aa---that's right, my mistake."

"It looks like an epidemic but we can't say for sure. We can't put a name to the disease. At least for now, no epidemics that fit the symptoms come to mind. Unidentified is the true state of things. It might be a contagion, and it might not be. Thinking about it it might be a virus, it might be bacteria, we're completely in the mist about it. There's the possibility of it being a parasite, or the possibility that it's a mass poisoning. What we do know is that something unusual is happening, that's where we're at."

Seishin nodded.

"The question now is whether something's happening or not. Why have there

been so many deaths, that's what we have to grasp."

From within the pile of documents, Toshio sought and dug out the clinical records.

"Megumi-chan's house call was on August 22nd. Megumi-chan fell the day before that on the 21st. She was found collapsed after a mountain hunt, and since then had been in bad condition, so I think we can think of her outbreak as being on on the 21st. Before that, there wasn't anything particularly wrong. At the least, her family didn't see anything wrong with her, and she herself wasn't claiming any complaints. Thinking that was strange, the family called me on the night of the 22nd, and it was three days after that she died. Four days after the outbreak. By the way Megumi-chan, when I saw her, didn't look at all from any angle like a patient three days from death."

"Right...."

"Aside from anemia, Megumi-chan didn't have anything else that could be seen as wrong with her. Why did she suddenly end up dying is, to be honest, something I don't know." Toshio threw out Megumi's clinical records on the table, lit a cigarette and exhaled smoke. "There's a danger of an epidemic. That's something I'm not denying. If on the off chance it is one, there's the possibility it'll become serious. That's why we need to investigate to understand the true state of things but that's a difficult problem."

"It's a difficult problem?"

Toshio nodded.

"The last time I saw Megumi-chan, she was incredibly lethargic, like just talking was tiring but she herself didn't seem to be aware of anything being out of order. That's probably how it was. Aside from the anemia, there wasn't anything special wrong with her. Pain, fever, if there was anything that could be assessed that was unusual, or even if the patient seemed off, I'd have been anxious. But, just being tired or easily worn out isn't something to consult a doctor for a diagnosis over. If those are the first symptoms of this illness, we're in trouble."

Knowing what he was trying to say, Seishin nodded. "Aa, that's true. Feeling sluggish and all is a common thing. Even thinking there might be a temperature

and measuring it to find out there isn't one really does happen a lot."

"Right. There's nobody who'd come rushing into the hospital over that, and we wouldn't be able to take it if they did come in over just that."

"All the more because the patient would know that. They look for the precise cause. A cold, every day fatigue, drinking too much, maybe those were the cause, they would think of every day occurrences. If that became even worse, they'd first probably lie down for a rest, doubting whether or not to consult a doctor."

"That's how it is. The patient doesn't feel anything's wrong. I can sleep it off, is how they think of it. Even so the battle with this illness is over quick. By all rights, there's no time to hesitate."

While hesitating another dead body with an imprecise death would appear. All Toshio could see was an indistinct dead body. There wasn't time to see how it progressed or run any tests. This was how the situation progressed in reality. If Shimizu hadn't had Megumi seen by Toshio, there would have been nothing seen in it by Seishin and the others other than another case of the "inexplicable serial sudden deaths."

"This starts out incredibly casual." Toshio stirred through the documents without aim. "Megumi-chan's started with anemia. I don't know about Gigorou-san or Hidemasa-san but Mieko baa-san came to the hospital just a little bit before those two died, saying they weren't well, that it was probably a summer cold."

"I heard the same thing when Shuuji-san died She thought it was a summer cold or that the summer heat was getting to him, Fuki-san was saying."

"I heard it too. A summer cold without a fever, Fuki-san said, Mieko baa-san said it too. In short, sluggish, without an appetite, and poor complexion. What or how they can't say but somehow they just don't look right, in other words. It's possible that might be from anemia after all, or maybe there's some way it appears besides anemia. At any rate, anemia sets in and it starts with trivial symptoms. From there, within a few days it suddenly gets much worse. You could even say drastic."

"Mieko-san had liver failure, right?"

"Right. The two old guys in Yamairi, Shuuji-san, and Megumi-chan are unclear. Fuki-san might have had acute renal failure. Uremia from renal failure, and that's the cause of death, I'd been thinking. Giichi-san may be the exception but anyway, he had aspiration pneumonia. Those are all the cards in my hand. Even though seven people've died."

Seishin groaned in his throat. Toshio needed detailed data but the early stages of it were just too trivial, the patient themselves would have no sense of impending danger. If they didn't come into the hospital, clinical data couldn't be assembled. That said, if they had the public offices spread the concern, with it starting as trivially as it did, everyone and anyone would flood the hospital and a panic would be unavoidable.

As if reading Seishin's thoughts, Toshio murmured. "Making a stupidly honest announcement of the situation would just be dangerous with no benefits. Tired, no appetite, worn out easily, if people came into the hospital over just that, the hospital'll be paralyzed. And that's not all, in the event it really is an epidemic, the hospital itself wouldn't be able to help becoming a source of contamination."

"But we can't leave it as it is can we? Anyway, at the point something feels off, we need to have them come in."

"We can't take it," Toshio sighed. "For those who've contracted it, we don't want them to think of it as nothing, but to look at it more seriously and come to the hospital. We want the patients who haven't contracted it not to make a pointless fuss and get neurotic. But whether they've contracted it or not the patient themselves wouldn't know."

Seishin nodded. "But, for the time being I think that there's a need to call attention to it. There are many whose physical conditions are deteriorating, so be aware; if we don't at least say that much, then..."

"Just thinking about what it's going to bring on is a pain in the ass but that's all we can do. We'll have to get the public office to cooperate with us, huh?" Toshio breathed a deep sigh. "We'll consult with the public health official Ishida-san, and spread it through the public office to get things under way. At any rate, that's the only way we even can start."

Part 2

The formerly independent village of Sotoba was now annexed into the town of Mizobe. That town of Mizobe had a Health Department in place but Sotoba's own health department was in the public office---that is, the public office bore the Sotoba branch of the city Health Department. Each community had an official who served at the public office as the health official as well. That said, the only one in charge of it all was Ishida. Basically Ishida worked according to instruction from Mizobe, dolling out orders to each community health official, nothing more than a messenger from the governing to the governed; with no particular specialized knowledge, he was an office worker through and through. On the one in a thousand chance that an epidemic was starting to spread, of course it would be too much for Ishida alone.

On the night of August the twenty third, Seishin and Toshio called Ishida to the temple and explained the situation. At first Ishida seemed to be in half doubt but upon receiving Toshio's explanation, his pallor changed.

"Last summer, four people died. Two in June, one in August and September each. To be precise, those are all the dead that I personally oversaw. The death in August was from a heart attack. For a year, well, that's about normal. On the other hand this year all at once, seven. August isn't even over yet but a in simple comparison of the dead up until now with last year's one, we have a surplus of seven or six people."

"Surplus..."

Toshio nodded.

"Not the best wording but the numbers are clearly too high for a normal death toll is what I'm saying. Now, looking at the raw numbers of the situation and that we have six more than last year wouldn't be anything to make a fuss over. Without a statistical analysis there's no way I can say anything definitive but all the same six people is enough to certainly call abnormal."

That's right, said Ishida with a dumbfounded nod.

"This August, it's certain something's happening in the village. It's causing the abnormal surplus of deaths. Sotoba's an incredibly tiny place, but just the same in one season alone there've been seven. On top of that, most of them were unexpected sudden death by some internal cause. Since it's come to this, it shouldn't be by any means unreasonable to suspect we have a mass outbreak of some kind of disease or another."

Yes, said Ishida wiping at his sweat with his handkerchief. It was an abnormally sultry night. The air was thick and stagnant, the tepid humidity rising. The glass of beer sat in front of Ishida was beaded with drops of water, the foam completely gone.

"But at the same time we're far off from being anywhere near knowing what's actually happening. All I can say about where we are now is that it starts with trivial symptoms, symptoms that while they aren't even aware of it themselves takes a dramatic turn for the worst into sudden death, is what it comes down to. And that it has a trend of spreading like fire to those nearby. If nothing else, I think it's certain it's spreading."

Ishida stared at Toshio with dependent eyes.

"It isn't yet a certainty that it's an epidemic, right?"

"I can't say anything definitive. But, if we cling to wishful thinking, then in the one in a million chance it is an epidemic, we won't get that lost time back. I think it's better to be vigilant as if assuming it is an epidemic."

"But, you know." Ishida patted his forehead with his handkerchief. "If you carelessly throw around the word epidemic..."

"That's the problem," Toshio sighed. "It's gonna be the worst. If rumor of a contagion spreads there the village there'll be a panic. The initial symptoms are too trivial and common, if they lose their cool, then the hospital's functionally paralyzed. It's not definitely a contagious disease but in the case that it is, if the patients march in on the hospital when we don't know the illness or the infection route, it's not just a bother it's a danger. I'd like to minimize that possibility as much as we can, if possible."

Ishida nodded.

Sotoba was dependent on the Ozaki Hospital. In a mountain village of merely 1,319 people, having a proper hospital at all in itself was a rarity. Sotoba had been blessed with such all this time, so that was all the more reason that their faith in the Ozaki Hospital was so high. The people in the village had a certain sense of duty practically taken on through osmosis that they wouldn't go to another hospital without a referral by Ozaki, so all the more reason that if rumors started of a plague, the villagers would mostly flood the Ozaki Hospital without a doubt.

"But.... But then, what should we...."

Seeing Ishida's dismay, Seishin explained.

"Could not a notice be passed about through you, Ishida-san, as the public health official? Phrased as if lately there have been many suffering summer fatigue and to be cautious."

"Circulating a notice is simple enough but..."

"If you think that someone has become fatigued, do not rely on a layperson's judgement and go to the doctor, it would say."

Toshio nodded.

"In the first place in the summer there're plenty who just take in drinks and lose their appetites. Couldn't you say the summer heat's still pretty stringent, so for the time being take in three square meals a day, don't diet excessively? Even a simple 'mind your health' it'll be fine. If we do that then at least as much as it'll actually protect against simple ailments, it'll be useful in sieving out a few patients."

"Yes, yes, ---that's true." Ishida wiped at his sun burnt neck. "But, will just that be enough? If we don't take some concrete measures to stop the spread of the infection..."

"Even if we try to take some concrete measures at our current level we don't have any measures to take. At best, all we'd have is don't drink well water, try to bring a canteen with you when going into the mountains, and mind what you're washing your hands and gargling with. Make too loud of a fuss and that'll

just be poking the bush with a stick."

"Haa..."

"That's why for the time being the only way we can start is with gathering data. The bunch in the village won't let you touch a corpse. Forget doing a pathological autopsy, they disapprove of even drawing blood after death. If they don't come into the hospital before they become a corpse, we can't even get a grasp on what's happening in the village."

"Yes--yes, that's right."

"There's no choice but to collect the data this way, compile it, then have the administration act on it. It's true enough that if it really does turn out to be an epidemic, it's going to be too much for us."

"Wouldn't it be better for me to pass this report up to the prefecture health department or the city health center?"

"You can try it I guess. But right now without a name to put to the disease, the government won't move. What those guys call an epidemic isn't something spreading around to the people; for them it's a word for an existing contagious disease written into the protocol or manuals. Unless the situation really gets huge, we probably can't count on any support. They can't do anything themselves. If you wanted to hurry it, there's the possibility of saying for example that food poisoning or hepatitis is spreading, but if I get an inquiry from the public office, I can't exactly give fake disease report."

"Th, that's indeed true."

"Anyway I'll collect the data. All we can do is get solid proof if something is spreading, then leave it to Kanemasa to get things moving," Toshio said, his face scrunching. "So I say but while the predecessor was one thing, I dunno if it's all right to rely on that old guy that much or not, but...."

Ishida nodded without really thinking. The previous generation of the Kanemasas, as well as the one before that had served as the village headmen and had been experienced, influential people. That predecessor died last year, and now his son was a member of the Diet but compared to the vigor of his predecessor, he was hopelessly flaky.

"It'd have been better if the predecessor were alive for us." Ishida murmured, then suddenly: "Come to think of it, the Kanemasa predecessor also died suddenly, didn't it?"

Toshio suddenly made a complicated expression as if something bitter had been tossed into his mouth.

"Yeah, but----. No matter how you stretch it, that's probably not related, right? We're talking last July, I'm sure. That was a year ago."

"There is that but. Well, I mean, you know."

"Anyway, in order to collect data first we need patients to come to the hospital."

"Yes, indeed. I understand."

"In the mean time, Ishida-san, this summer's---yeah, since July, I want the list of those who've died since then. There might've been deaths amongst those who weren't my patients, too. If there were, I'd like copies of their death certificates too, but."

Ishida nodded.

"I'll see what I can do tomorrow. At the latest I will have them prepared by the day after tomorrow. My jurisdiction is over demographics but I'll see what I can do about compiling them quickly for that period."

"The day after tomorrow's fine. But, definitely by the day after tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

Part 3

The day after Toshio met with Ishida, it was abnormally sultry. Of the patients

who came into the hospital, all of them were conspicuously weary. At any rate, it seemed like a shower was approaching. In the midsts of that, from the Monzen Yasumori family came Nao. The instant Nao entered the examining room, Toshio had a feeling.

What is it, Toshio asked as a formality, though Nao's complexion was clearly poor, and indeed she looked worn down. Even if the fatigue was the same, there was something different from the patients suffering from the heat and the humidity. Nao moved her lips faintly as if to answer but even that seemed to be too much and stopped.

"What's up? You look tired." While pushing her again for a response, Toshio took Nao's hand. She was powerless and felt cool to the touch. Her pulse was pretty fast but not enough to qualify as tachycardia. Peering at her face up close, those eyes of hers had the impression of someone somehow possessed. It was the way her conjunctiva was so blueish.

"I'm tired... My mother-in-law said I had to go to the hospital no matter what, so."

"I see. Doesn't look like you have a fever, does it? So with that, it probably isn't a cold. When did you start feeling like this?"

"Yesterday... No, this morning."

"Which one?"

"This morning, as soon as I woke up I was very tired. It was hot at night so I didn't sleep well... But, my mother-in-law asked me I don't know how many times since yesterday if I was all right."

Toshio tilted his head. She was talking strangely.

"And Nao-san yourself, you didn't think you felt particularly sluggish at any point yesterday?"

"...I don't know. If I have to say it one way or another I think I had the feeling I was tired. ... Like, my head was heavy. I was dazed."

"Looks like it," Toshio nodded. "Any shortness of breath or palpitations?"

While asking he took her pulse. Her blood pressure was a little weak, so he

couldn't get it clearly by touch.

"No, yes,.... I don't really know."

"Did you eat?"

Her voice answering that she hadn't seemed to die out. Lifting up her eyelid to look at the membrane, the color was faint. Her nails were white, and just to be sure he had her open her mouth to confirm that her oral cavity too had lost its healthy reddish color. It was similar---to Megumi's.

"Dizziness when you stand?"

"Yes, some."

"Your period's been regular, right? Are you menstruating now?"

Yes, Nao nodded.

"That's good. Looks like you have a case of anemia," Toshio said, then added on. "Just in case let's do a full examination. Do you have any other pains anywhere?"

"No... not really."

Really, Toshio murmured, telling Nao to head into the other examining room and strip. He instructed the nurse Kiyomi to take her height, weight, pulse, blood pressure and temperature.

While he was seeing other patients, Kiyomi finished taking the measurements. Her blood pressure was pretty low, her pulse pretty high. There was a slight fever but, at any rate nothing abnormal.

At a glance her skin was losing its healthy glow but she wasn't particularly jaundiced and had no particular purple spots. Her nails and tongue seemed normal, and there was nothing abnormal about her hair.

"Raise both your knees if you could. ---Any problems going to the bathroom or difficulties passing urine?"

"No..."

Nodding, he felt the lower region of her liver. Nothing felt abnormal.

"Nothing unusual about the color? A brownish color or a reddish color or..."

"...I don't think so."

Nao's responses sounded incredibly labored. While asking her medical, life and family history, he performed palpations. There were no particular signs of a swollen spleen, the lymph nodes at her neck and underarm were slightly swollen. Listening with a stethoscope, there were no particular disruptive sounds in her heart or veins. ---As expected, it looked like simple anemia.

"I think it's anemia, but," Toshio stated while instructing her to put her clothes on. "Still, since anemia can occur due to internal bleeds, I'd like to do an X-ray, is that all right?"

Nao nodded, so he gave instructions to Kiyomi.

"An X-ray of the chest and abdomen. Also, run a blood and urine test. Take enough for us to run an analysis here. And a bone marrow sample."

"Bone marrow? From the sternum?" Kiyomi blinked.

"Mm. And then take a sample for a peripheral smear too." Bearing the questioning gaze of Kiyomi, Toshio gave a smile to Nao. "I'll be taking a little bone marrow sample. It might hurt a little, but it's not really a scary test or anything. Anyway, for today we'll run the labs and prescribe some vitamins, so come back in three days. But," Toshio added on firmly. "If tomorrow morning, you feel more tired than today or you have a fever or you feel anything's going wrong, come in tomorrow. Got that?"

Nao nodded but her face was indifferent. She looked like it was somebody else's business. It seemed like she wasn't feeling any distress at all but maybe it was weighing on her.

Watching over Nao as she was urged into the treatment room by Kiyomi, Yasuyo quietly called to him.

"Doctor--is it something bad?"

Nah, Toshio shrugged his shoulders. "If it was bad, I'd refer her to the national hospital. This's just in case."

"But."

He waved a hand to stop what Yasuyo was going to say. "If it was just a cold or just nephritis, I wouldn't be watching it this close. It looks like Nao-san is showing signs of anemia. And 'just anemia' at that. If that's the case it's nothing to get neurotic about. ---But, Megumi-chan was like that."

Yasuyo nodded, with an understanding look. "You don't want to have any regrets."

"That is correct."

"Tanaka-san, I'm sorry but could I ask a favor of you?"

Tanaka Yoshikazu blinked as the health department's Ishida asked of him. Ishida suddenly said he'd wanted to know the deaths that had come in since July. It wasn't the right time of year for a demographic survey, and the time for the month's census was long past. When he tried to ask the reason, his words were unclear and not very satisfying but at any rate he nodded.

"You'd like me to prepare the names of the deceased and make copies of their death notices, then. In secret?"

"It isn't anything especially suspicious. There was something bothering me that I wanted to investigate is all. It isn't something to make a fuss over so if you could do it without drawing attention to it."

Tanaka nodded and during the lunch break when the branch office staff were all out, at his own discretion he took the death notices out of the binders. With a dry sound, a water droplet splattered against the public office's window. The moisture that had been building all morning at last passed the saturation point and fell as drops of water---that was the impression Tanaka had. Large drops of rain scattered, soon changing into a shower that sounded like water in the bottom of a bucket. It was shaping up to be the rain they were long overdue. The public office devoid of any signs of anyone else quickly grew dark.

Tanaka brought the binder back to his own desk. The one in the top binder was Shimizu Ryuuji. Tanaka didn't know that man. Forty one years old, his death certificate was issued from Mizobe's General Hospital. Before that was an old woman named Gotouda Fuki. Before that was Ohtsuka Yasuyuki.

Without thinking much of it, Tanaka gazed at the face. It was the Ohtsuka

sawmill's son. He was in a different mourning group but as he lived right next door to him, Tanaka himself had attended his service.

(Come to think of it, this year there have been serial funerals...)

Before Otsuka Yasuyuki, Shimizu Megumi had died. The one beneath the death certificate of the old woman man who died in Monzen was Megumi's. She was his daughter's childhood friend, a year older, just a tenth grader. He had sympathies for the Shimizu household for their despondency but his daughter's grief over losing her friend was terrible, too.

Before that the three people in Yamairi died, which had been a big fuss. Three old people died---

Tanaka's hands stopped over the binder. What Ishida said he had wanted to investigate was this, he thought. Yes, it was clear there were too many deaths.

Before Shimizu Megumi was the young man in Naka-Sotoba, and the three old people in Yamairi. Before that somebody in Kami-Sotoba had died. This was all since August started.

(...This many?)

Tanaka was in charge of the family register and certificates of residency but in practice whoever was free manned the front window to take any report for processing. The Sotoba office was small. In all it was a six person organization. Even if their areas of duty were defined, that was how things were, so he hadn't noticed. But, for just coming into August, these numbers were abnormal.

Tanaka felt like the blood was being drawn from him as he turned the pages of the binder. Before the death in Kami-Sotoba, an old man in Sotoba, was on July 3rd. It was at the Mizobe National Hospital where he died of esophagus cancer, and it had been five months before that without a death.

Something unusual was happening. Starting at the beginning of August.

Tanaka gathered the files and called Ishida from the staff members who were having lunch in the locker room. He must have noticed Tanaka's expression, as Ishida's face stiffened as he came out.

"Ishida-san, here."

Ishida expressed his thanks and took the pile of copies. Ishida looked at Tanaka's imploring expression.

"Ishida-san, is something happening?" Tanaka asked in a quiet voice. In the sounds of the rain like an earthly tremor, thunder crashed. "Since the beginning of August, what's happening to this village? Is this what Ishida-san wanted to investigate?"

"How many people was it?"

"It's ten."

Ishida looked over Tanaka's stiff expression. It was far more than he imagined.

"Tanaka-san, I understand your feelings. But where we're at right now, I can't say anything. At any rate, we are taking appropriate measures."

"But...."

Ishida stared into Tanaka's eyes, brimming with fear.

"Please keep this close to the breast. You understand, don't you? If this leaks out, it will become bigger. In exchange I will tell you of our progress. Just as I've asked you today, from now on can I ask you for copies of any death certificates that come in?"

Tanaka, swallowing down his breath, nodded.

"Oh, is it coming down?"

Hasegawa asked this of the young man who entered the shop.

Yuuki turned to look at the window. That said, creole had but one window, and it was stained glass. It wasn't one through which you could see the scenery beyond the window but outside of the window was dark. In between the BGM the sounds of the rain striking could be heard.

"It's turning out to be a real downpour," the young man laughed, putting down his case beside the counter. "Here's the voucher. Is there anything else?"

Just a moment, Hasegawa said as he headed into the kitchen coming back with a memo.

"I'll leave this to you. It has the numbers written down. Where's Mikami-kun

today?"

"Mikami-kun's quit. Since he'd moved all of a sudden."

"Heh? Last week when he came by, he didn't say anything about that."

The young man nodded. "That's right. It was really sudden. Quitting as suddenly as that was a burden on everyone, actually."

"I'd bet," Hasegawa said, throwing away the packing tape. "Things being what they are. Be careful driving back."

Thank you, the young man said flashing white teeth and leaving the store. As the door opened and closed, the sound of the rainfall drifted in even more strongly.

"It is coming down hard," Yuuki said as Hasegawa, case in hand, turned his eye to the window.

"It's been so humid. With this it should start to cool off some. About time, I say."

"It will be nice if it does," Hirosawa said with a wry smile. "Until now we've missed out on the rain after all."

Hirosawa was at the counter with an open text book and notebook. It was August twenty fourth. He must have been preparing for the new school term. Beside him, as usual the bookstore owner Tashiro was having a late lunch.

"Really," Hasegawa said with an exaggerated sigh. "I wonder what to make of this year's summer season. Not much rain, oppressive heat. Heatstroke was it, I believe? Somebody in Mizobe had died of it. A person working at the JA warehouse had died, it said in the newspaper."

Yuuki's face scrunched without thinking. The word dead, in regards to a person, somehow hit close to him. Just the day before, he had just come out of the funeral service for his mourning group for Gotouda Fuki. Thinking back, the first time he had come into creole had been after a funeral. Fuki's son's funeral--his first time participating in his mourning crew. The old woman who slouched into the the chief mourner's seat was half a month later buried near her son.

Yuuki let out a light sigh.

"Somehow... it's like there's a lot of deaths." As Yuuki spoke, Hasegawa, Hirosawa, and at last Tashiro looked to him. "Is this just how it goes?"

In the town Yuuki had lived in, there hadn't been that many deaths in a row. In a mere half a month, Gotouda Shuuji, Fuki, and Shimizu Megumi made three funerals Yuuki had attended. And there was the incident in Yamairi. As the deceased were old people who lived in Yamairi, it had nothing to do with Yuuki and Yuuki's mourning crew but, he had heard that Gotouda Fuki's brother had died. In half a month four houses, six people dead seemed a bit too much. Especially when thinking of the population, this rate wasn't something he thought could be normal.

"It isn't quite how it goes, but," Hirosawa said with a forced smile. "It's just it's something that happens, you could say, as there are, fundamentally, many elderly. When the weather changes, it is common to see a line of deaths in a row, often enough."

On top of that, Hasegawa laughed. "The population is small here, and the relationships between people are intimate, so if somebody or anybody from anywhere dies, it will spread around before you know it. There are the mourning groups, and if there's a funeral nearby it isn't like "who died?" or anything. Not like it is in the city."

"Ah, certainly."

"But well, it does feel like there have been a lot of deaths. In truth, in regards to the size of the population, it is a lot, isn't it? Since it's all elderly out here."

Hirosawa nodded. "Mysteriously, the thing which we call death comes in rows. Once the mourning group sets out, it feels like they've just been out, the saying goes. Once that ceases, for a while nothing will happen, and then again another run of them. It's akin to---it's like a wave."

Indeed, Hasegawa and Tashiro agreed.

"There's some polarization to it," Tashiro nodded enthusiastically. "In a given season, a mourning group's duties will keep coming, and even though we're running about like crazy, the neighboring group is quiet and tranquil."

"Heh?"

Hasegawa smiled. "True, I mean, it's been rather long time no see with my local mourning group. To begin with, I've only participated in a mourning group once myself. Since moving to Sotoba."

"Is that right."

"It was when I'd first moved in, and only once. Before we moved, my wife's father died, so that's two all together. For that I wasn't particularly involved with the mourning crew. In regards to mourning groups, Yuuki-san has become more experienced than myself."

Is that how it is, Yuuki thought. Hirosawa smiled softly.

"I, too, haven't seen the mourning group in some time. When we set out for Shuuji-kun's case, it had been five years. Since the one before that was my mother's funeral. It was consecutive at that time, too. To be sure, it's unusual for it to be within half a month but in about one month's time two houses had them in a row. As soon as I thought it wouldn't continue, next it was my own mother's turn. They were drawing each other along, I'd thought then. "

"Drawing each other?"

Hirosawa nodded. "The one who died before my mother was a person my mother had gotten along with. They were lonely and called my mother to join them, I thought. Drawing her to that world..."

"Ah, so pulling along, you mean."

"That's superstition though. It's just, grief is something that comes in cycles. Though that kind of explanation feels completely ridiculous. It isn't a theory, it's a feeling."

Hasegawa spoke as if laden with a particular emotion. "Shuuji-san may have pitied his mother he left behind and pulled her to him."

Hirosawa forced a smile. "Though we know that couldn't be, in our heads. Murasako's Hidemasa-san pulled along his beloved nephew, and the pulled along Shuuji-san pulled his mother who had been left behind. If you present it like that, it somehow feels like an explanation. It's satisfying, so to speak."

As that was how it really went, Yuuki nodded wordlessly. At the same time, it was incomprehensible, he thought.

Death was a universal phenomenon. If they were born, there was no human who wouldn't die. Even though a person's death was a given, to the people surrounding them, it wasn't generally felt as the natural taking its course. Just the opposite. They embraced the sensation that something that should not have happened occurred. That continued. Something that shouldn't have happened happened again, feeling almost like they were caught up in a disaster. Always, something which you had no consciousness of was thrusting you into a fabricated and unreasonable reality, the sensation of discomfort, dread and unease, a sense of mystery. Can this keep happening, a feeling says, the uneasiness of what to do if it carries on, and the original fear that goes 'I knew it' when it does. It wasn't a sensation that could easily be explained but if you turned your words about enough, that could at least express it.

Even knowing it was the work of chance, one couldn't think it was anything other than the work of something's choice. Something distinctly outside of one's self, called "death." Impossible to control or even to be influenced, the merciless divine providence. The vague and ambiguous unease towards it, you met with it as if being "drawn" and were liquidated. ---Mysteriously.

"Humans are strange beings," Yuuki murmured. As Hirosawa tilted his head dubiously, Yuuki smile. "Or maybe that death in regards to humans is the way to phrase it. "I have the feeling humans have a strange way of behaving when it comes to death."

That's true, said Hirosawa, showing a peaceful smile.

Even as evening fell the rain hadn't stopped. On the contrary, it grew gradually stronger, showing signs of being a downpour. In the thick curtain of clouds and rain, despite being before five it was already dark. Takami stood and turned on the light.

Even trying to look out from the door window, even the row of houses just across the street was hazy. A water current ran over the surface of the road. As expected the human traffic died out, the residential police box isolated in the rain.

The sound of the rain reverberated as if shaking the earth. The sound somehow fanned his unease. The flickering florescent light too blinked as if to spur that on further still. Like signaling a bad omen, the phone rang.

Takami lifted the old fashioned style black receiver. The one calling was Yasumori Tokujirou.

"Ah---Takami-san. It's really coming down, isn't it."

"You said it. What's the matter?"

"Nothing really, I just saw the river though and the water level's pretty high. The water's a muddy color too. Seems a lot of dirt's being swept away. Even without that, with the long drought we've been having, the grass and the roots all dried up, and the slopes have been getting fragile. If the rain goes on like this, just to be prepared, I was thinking we should call the fire brigade together."

Takami nodded. "That might be good. I'll open the station for you."

The fire brigade's station was right next to the residential police box. Takami was given a spare key just for such occasions as this.

"I don't think the mountain stream's riverbanks are so fragile they'll break for nothing, myself. It's just, it might overflow downriver or at the drainage channel, and all."

"Yes. Then there's the mountainsides. It will be fine if we don't have a landslide, but."

"You said it. We'll have the Ward Headmen go around giving the announcements to be careful."

Tokujirou apologized two or three times before hanging up the phone. Takami took the station's spare key and put on warm clothes and a raincoat. He couldn't see the point in bringing an umbrella. Mumbling that it was terrible, Takami undid the station lock. He turned the light on. Before long, the brigade members would start showing up as time permitted. Returning to the station while thinking he'd have to help his wife at the soup kitchen, he left the station. Just on the verge of returning, his feet suddenly stopped on a whim. The water was flowing past the shell of his rubber boots. He couldn't say Tokujirou's

concerns were baseless fears. If things went poorly, the slopes really were liable to give.

Takami looked towards the western mountains. With the curtain of rain, of course the mountain couldn't be made out.

"....It could be bad, huh." Takami mumbled to himself. He thought of the Kanemasa house. To begin with it was a house on high grounds, and worse, last year the foundations had been tampered with. Luxurious garden trees were transported in. In other words, the roots and the ground were dug up, then leveled out. Tokujirou said they would go around giving notices but was there anybody who would go about to contact that household?

Takami hesitated somewhat. By all rights, if someone had moved in he would have had to do door to door canvassing. He had to ask the family structure and phone number and mark it down in the ledger but Takami had neglected to do such until today. There was the fact that the house's structure seemed to reject outsiders, making him nervous. But secondly there was also the fact that even when he did ask, there was no answer at the intercom. Then there was the fact that earlier that summer, wanting to confirm whether anyone had moved in or not, he'd snuck in, and had felt a little guilty. But, if that was the case for even Takami, then there might not have been anyone at all who had their phone number in order to call them and tell them. Even if that wasn't the case, in the event someone were worried about a landslide, was there anybody who'd remember Kanemasa? In this rain, was there anybody who would take the trouble to go say something to them?

"I'd best go on then, with it like this."

Takami drummed up his courage and started off by foot towards the west. While the tempestuous streaks of pouring rain battered his shoulders and back, he hurried over the fording roads. It was for the best that somebody contacted them. Even if two people did, there wouldn't be anything wrong with that.

After Takami set out, the office was left unmanned. The surroundings were blurred in ink-black. Amongst that, the station's doorway was open, light tinged yolk-yellow leaking out.

Part 4

Ohkawa Gigorou -- (August 1st?)

77 years old / Yamairi

Cause of death unknown

Murasako Hidemasa -- (August 1st?)

75 years old / Yamairi

Cause of death unknown

Murasako Mieko -- August 5th

68 years old / Yamairi

Acute liver failure?

Gotouda Shuuji -- August 6th

39 years old / Kami-Sotoba

Acute heart failure

Cause of death unknown

Hirosawa Takatoshi -- August 11th

28 years old / Naka-Sotoba

Acute Heart Failure

Shimizu Megumi -- August 15th

15 years old / Shimo-Sotoba

Cause of death Unknown

Yasumori Giichi -- August 17th

74 years old / Monzen

Pneumonia

Ohtsuka Yasuyuki -- August 18th

35 years old / Shimo-Sotoba

Acute liver failure

Gotouda Fuki -- August 21st

69 years old / Kami-Sotoba

Acute renal failure?

Shimizu Ryuuji -- August 23rd

41 years old / Sotoba

Acute heart failure

Seishin peered at his notes.

"Aside from Giichi-san, cause unknown or acute failure, is what it comes down to isn't it?"

"That'd be one way to put it. Anyone's sudden death can be expressed in terms of unexpected organ failure. The one and only exception seems to be Giichi-san, it's just that..." Toshio started, the edges of his brows knitting together as he fixed his eyes on the memo. The word organ failure is used to denote a condition where the nature of what caused the fatal damage to the function of the organ can't be properly defined. It's rare for just one organ to shut down in one shot. It usually happens that one organ's functioning declines and it influences the other organs, advancing to multiple organ failures. It usually involves symptoms showing for the whole body. Even with only one cause of death, the odds are high that there'll be symptom across multiple organs. That was the case with Mieko baa-san."

Ah, Seishin nodded. Mieko had been dissected with problems discovered here and there. It was said to be liver failure but that was because of the striking necrosis of her liver.

"A compromised host is another possibility. A being whose immune system has been weakened gets prone to infection. Giichi-san's pneumonia isn't impossible to see as a link in this, so we can't just split them up based on the cause of death. While there's still a question mark on all this, it's better to calculate them all as serial deaths, isn't it?"

Seishin nodded.

"Symptoms they all have in common are---sudden outbreak, organ failure, full body problems?"

"I didn't oversee its progression so I can't say anything but looking just at this, I

think we can say that it leads to multiple organ failure. Whether it's the liver breaking down or the heart breaking down doesn't matter, there's some kind of cause, and there's the impression that in the end it leads to multiple organ failure, right?"

Ishida tilted his head, and Toshio gave a breath.

"In other words, I'm saying this. I don't know if it's an infection, poisoning, or something else. At any rate, there's a culprit, and you can think of it having killed ten people. Mieko-san died of liver failure. But that can't be definitively said to be because our serial killer attacked the liver. The serial killer might've attacked another part.

In truth, looking at Mieko baa-san's autopsy report, of course there was the liver, but the lungs, heart, kidneys, all the vital organs showed signs of problems. The serial killer might've attacked the lungs first. The other organs functions declined, pulled along the problems with her lungs, and in the end the liver was the first to give out, is another way it could be interpreted."

"Ah, I see."

"Something attacked ten people. With it as the trigger, their whole body's functioning suffered, with multiple organs' decreased functioning, is the best way to think of it. The problem is what's inducing the multiple organ failure, that's what we have to figure out but---"

"Absolutely terrible, this is just," Ishida was at his wits end. "This is huge!"

"The death toll is ten, and there's the possibility that each of them had the same pattern. First, the thing to do is look for the common cause."

"Common cause?"

"That's right. The ten people should have something in common. They set foot in the same place, touched something, ate the same thing, ---there should be something."

Seishin looked at the written notes. The years were scattered, the first three cases were in the community of Yamairi but the places were scattered, it didn't look like there was any place that it was inclined towards. When he said as much, Toshio nodded.

"Seven men, three women, it'd be a weak inclination if any. There're the elderly but there's also a high school student. Territorially, you could say it's all over Sotoba. The first three were generally restricted to Yamairi in their daily habits,

it might have seemed like ti was restricted to Yamairi but I can't imagine Megumi-chan setting foot in Yamairi. Much less Giichi-san who's bedridden. It's more likely to think the other nine people came into Monzen but if something that was the cause was in Monzen, then it doesn't make sense that there's only one death in Monzen. There should be more deaths in Monzen."

Ishida groaned. "There's no choice but to go door to door and see if anything matches. I'll----"

"That'd be bad," Toshio stopped Ishida. "If Ishida-san goes out asking persistently, the family will think something's up. There should be a more discrete way to investigate."

"For the time being," Seishin said taking the notes from Toshio. "I'll try asking as much as I'm able. Either way, I will be going into most of the houses for memorial services after all. It isn't as if I have no connections to Shimizu Gardening or the Ohtsuka Sawmill after all, I can probably at least start a conversation to ask them. For this Hirosawa Takatoshi person, even, I may be able to find out something through connections with the parish families."

Toshio exhaled. "It's incredibly suspicious but that'd be the most quiet way to do it. Then, we'll leave this to Seishin."

Seishin nodded.

"For the time being, we'll suspect an epidemic as the worst case scenario. If we do that, there's no problem thinking that Fuki-san caught it from Shuuji-san. The problem is Shuuji-san, who'd be suspected to have caught it from Hidemasa-san more than anyone else. There's a possibility that the compass needle in this case is pointing to one of the first three in Yamairi."

Seishin nodded and took the notes.

"Megumi-chan fell on August 11th, and died on the 15th. I don't know what her condition was on the tenth but for the time being if we think of the outbreak as being on the eleventh, it was four days until she died."

"Fuki-san was saying that Shuuji-san's condition was off two or three days before."

"The day of the outbreak isn't clear but it looks the same as Megumi's case as expected. The Murasako's Mieko-san came in to the hospital on---" Toshio's eyes fell to the notebook. "July 30th, a Saturday, for Gigorou-san's medicine. At that time she was saying how Gigorou-san had caught a summer cold, and that

Hidemasa-san seemed to have caught it, too. The police autopsy estimated their day of death as around August 1st. I don't know when Hidemasa-san had the outbreak but if it was the day before we were told about his poor condition, thinking of it as on the twenty ninth, it was three days until he died."

Shimizu Megumi -- Outbreak - August 11 (?)

Died - August 15th

Gotouda Shuuji -- Outbreak - August 3rd (?)

Died - August 5th

Ohkawa Gigorou --Outbreak - July 28th (?)

Died - August 1st (?)

Murasako Hidemasa -- Outbreak - July 29th (?)

Died - August 1st (?)

"Either way, between the outbreak and death there are only a few days. If we assume for argument's sake a breadth of about five days, Fuki-san's corpse that was discovered on the 21st---when her death was probably the day before on the 20th, making the outbreak probably on the 15th or later."

Seishin nodded.

Gotouda Fuki -- Outbreak - August 15th (?)

Died - August 20th

"I think Fuki-san was sure to have caught it from Shuuji-san. Shuuji-san's death was on the sixth, estimated outbreak on the third. Between Shuuji-san's outbreak and Fuki-san's outbreak is an interval of twelve days. If we count from when Shuuji-san died, it becomes nine days. The spread is from one to two weeks, which would make that the incubation period. Megumi-chan's outbreak was on the eleventh, which means Megumi-chan was infected somewhere between August 4th to July 19th. This overlaps right with when the three in Yamairi had their outbreak and died. If it was a direct infection, Megumi-chan would have had to have contact with the three in Yamairi at this time but---she wouldn't, would she? Not normally."

Seishin and Ishida nodded. The odds of a highschooler living in Shimo-Sotoba

making contact with three old people who lived in Yamairi were low no matter how one thought about it.

"Because that indeed doesn't seem to be the case, if we could clarify that she had contact with them, we could say with certainty that it was a direct infection, but. Mieko baa-san's death was on August 4th. Since when she came to the hospital on the 30th she didn't say a word about anything feeling wrong with her, the outbreak must have been after that on the thirty first or August 1st, without much doubt."

Murasako Mieko -- Outbreak - July 31st (?)

Died - August 5th

"With that, the infection was between July 17th and the 20th, so thinking that she contracted it from Hidemasa-san at this time is a little unreasonable. It's probably more appropriate to think that Gigorou-san and Hidemasa-san happened one right after the other."

"Something happened in the middle of July. And probably in Yamairi."

"Probably. If they didn't go out anywhere during that time, the source of the contagion is in Yamairi. The problem is Shuuji-san."

"Was it the people of Yamairi, or possibly Yamairi itself."

"That's what it comes to, doesn't it? It's not clear if the Yasumori's Giichi-san had the same disease or not but if we say it is the same thing, he was infected more or less at the same time as Megumi-chan. However Giichi-san was bedridden, he couldn't have gone out himself. Right now, there's nobody at the Maruyasu Sawmill who's in bad condition, so if somebody infected him, somebody paying a sick visit would be suspect. Did anyone pay a sick visit to Giichi-san's place at the end of July---moreover, someone connected to Yamairi."

"I'll try asking," Seishin jotted as much down on his notes. "---Is there anything else?"

"The Yasumori Contracting firm. Today, Nao-san from the contractors came for an examination. I did as many examinations as I could but it was clearly anemia. Other than that there was nothing wrong that could be said to be it. It's the same, like Megumi-chan."

Seishin's hand stopped as he looked to Toshio's face.

"It can't be---?"

"I can't make a proclamation of it but the likelihood is high. Today's the 24th, so if Nao-san was infected, it was between August 10th and August 17th. Just around when Giichi-san died."

The Yasumori Contractors were a branch family of the Maruyasu Sawmill. Giichi was the oldest son of the Yasumori enterprises, Tokujirou's older brother. Even beyond work, their connections were deep, and the houses were close and intimate.

"According to what Nao-san herself said when I asked her, she didn't go anywhere in particular nor did anything special happen. She didn't go to Yamairi, and didn't meet with the three from Yamairi. She doesn't know Gotouda Shuuji-san. She's only heard of his name, that's about it. But, when going over to the sawmill, it seems she met with Giichi-san countless times when seeing how he was doing. Of course, she also came to the all night vigil. If Nao-san does have what we're talking about, there's probably no mistake in thinking Giichi-san had it."

Ishida gave a deep sigh and shook his head. "Then, anyway, for that much we will depend on the Junior Monk's kindness... After that, concretely, what do we...?"

Toshio gave a small groan.

"At any rate, we don't have enough information. First, we need to quickly get a grasp on what's happening. To say it concretely, our top priority is the particular cause of death. The disease's specific name, or otherwise its specific cause. What's the cause for so many deaths, what's this thing's nature, we need to make it clear whether it's a contagion or not. We'll need a clinical sample for that. Like it is now, everything over and jumping to announcing their deaths, we can't give a satisfactory cause of death."

Seishin murmured. "But, we can't avoid a situation where patients flood the hospital spurred in by worry...."

"Right. That's the dilemma. The bottleneck here is that the initial symptoms are basic and easy to overlook. We don't have any choice but to have Ishida-san handle this by passing around a warning notice about not leave summer colds or fatigue from the heat to a layperson's judgement."

Ishida nodded. "Anyways, I will make the leaflets ASAP. How do leaflets with

the symptoms of summer colds or summer heat's symptoms and how to treat those conditions sound?"

"I'd be grateful if you could do it like that. And how to assess cases of summer colds or summer heat, and along with that how to treat those in-home, and that if the symptoms don't match, or if how treatment is having no effect, to go to the hospital."

"I'll do it. And urgently."

"Counting on it. And if there are any death certificates that come into the office from doctors other than me, I want to know about them right away."

"I will send copies of the death certificates. It would be better to avoid faxing them, wouldn't it?"

"That's right. That'd probably be better. I'm sorry for the trouble of the trip, but please deliver them directly."

"Understood."

"From there, I'll count on Seishin for the investigations on the dead. I'll let you know the details of the investigation later. We can't talk about the circumstances, so it can't be helped that you'll have to ask about things in the indirect range. Since the victims themselves are already dead anyway, there's a limit to how much can be investigated, too. Rather, I don't want to make things worse."

Seishin nodded and looked to Toshio. "What about Mizobe and the Health Department?"

"That's the problem. What can we do about that."

"We can't very well keep it quiet, can we? At any rate, you have passed on the death tolls from the branch office up to the government office haven't you, Ishida-san?"

"Not the ones from August yet but, I will send them up immediately."

Toshio exhaled. "For now, there's no real obligation to report things up to the Health Department, but. It's probably necessary to report that there's been a lot of deaths."

Ishida nodded. "I'll report that there's a possibility of a massive disease outbreak."

"I've got my doubts they'll believe it or see it as a problem and take any action, but. Anyway, let them know that we've gotten this far. Afterwards we'll get

together to see how far we've gotten."

"How does one week sound?"

"Sounds fine. And it'd probably be best to indirectly at least get Kanemasa involved. I'll take care of contacting him."

"And Tamo?" Seishin asked. Tamo Sadaichi was someone who could essentially be called the village headman. Essentially it was something for which the three pillars should be called together for. "We likely should need to inform Sadaichi-san too?"

Toshio was caught in thought. "Let's keep that quiet for now, sorry to say to Sadaichi-san. In the first place we've still got some doubts, and we don't have a single thing nailed down for sure yet. If Sadaichi-san asks, then we can't not report the true state of affairs to him but if he doesn't then it's probably better to wait until we at least know if it's an epidemic or not. If he knows about it, there's no way he can't report it to the Ward Headman's Association, after all." That's true, said Ishida taking the notepad and closing it. "Well then, for the time being it will be between this group."

Part 5

Toshio joined Ishida in leaving the temple office. The grounds were awash in rain like literal waterfalls. At the best of times the outside lights were hazy with moisture, making the courtyard all the darker now.

Taking Ishida's car back to the hospital, Toshio held up his recently unused umbrella and jogged across the grounds. Trying to find a place for his feet to fall that wasn't a puddle of water proved difficult. When he stepped into the white Corolla, he was already soaked from the knees down.

Ishida slid into the driver's side and closed the door. With the sounds of the rain now sounding a bit far off, the inside of the car had the air of a locked room.

"...Ishida-san, I want to discuss something with you."

Yes, Ishida asked, starting the engine and turning to look at Toshio.

"This case; could I have you keep it quiet for a while?"

"Yes, but of course."

Toshio looked to the front pane of glass fogged by moisture out into the darkness and the rain of the grounds as he spoke.

"That's not what I mean. For a while, I want you to hold off on reporting to your superiors. Until I say it's okay, I don't want you to send anything out of Sotoba."

Ishida blinked. Cutting off Ishida before he could say 'but', Toshio urged him to start driving. For the short distance to the Ozaki clinic he said nothing, opening his mouth only once they were at their destination. In the parking lot at night, in the curtain of rain that left nothing to be seen, the inside of the car was a completely isolated world.

"...Ishida-san. To tell the truth, I think it's a plague. I dare say I'm sure of it. And no common one. I researched and researched, but no epidemic that matches the symptoms was found."

"You can't mean a new strain?"

"A new strain or a variant strain, I can't tell. It's possible that it just simply looks that way, but. At any rate, what's certain is that this is something momentous. Just looking at the victims we can see, they have a terrifyingly high mortality rate. Of course, there might be those with a sub-clinical infection. An outbreak that healed without anybody noticing is a possibility. But when that's not the case, it takes a sudden turn for the worse, and they die right away without any opening for treatment. And looking at just the death certificates, by the time it's at the level where anybody could notice the symptoms, it's already too far gone to do a thing about it."

Ishida's throat suddenly, audibly tightened.

"I don't know if it's sure to break out if someone's infected. But, I'm under the impression that once it breaks out, it's out of my hands. Starting in Yamairi, Sotoba's been contaminated. Like that, it'd been spreading."

"Y... yeah, yes."

"You report this to the administration. You do that, and what do you think will happen?"

"What, you say...."

"If at the end of the day it was a known epidemic, there'd be nothing to fear. I have an obligation to report, too. I can't just stay quiet. But if this is like I said before a new strain, what then? In that case, what can the administration do?"

Ishida moaned deep in his throat.

"...They can't do anything. As long as it isn't covered under the Communicative Diseases Prevention Law, or it isn't food poisoning with means determined by the food hygiene laws, there isn't any guideline for how to handle it."

"That's it exactly. In this case, it's not food poisoning. What's covered by the Communicative Diseases Prevention Law?"

"Uhm...."

"Eleven infectious diseases requiring official reporting, two kinds of specified communicable diseases, twelve a physician is required to report within twenty four hours of diagnosis, the Parasite Prevention Law, the Tuberculous Control Law, one counts under the Leprosy Prevention Law, the Venereal Disease Prevention Law covers four, for a sum of thirty-two types covered. Furthermore of those infectious diseases that are regulated to be kept under surveillance, none overlap with those thirty-two. ---If it's one of those, there's no problem. Even if it's a variant strain. But, if that's not the case? Of course the administration has to do

something."

"Yes...."

Ishida was shivering. That was correct. If there was no legal method of handling it the only thing to do would be to isolate the patients. The doctors and administration couldn't very well ignore the person's wishes and strap them down!

"When it comes to giving them an honorable little push for assistance, we

can't count on the Kanemasa's son. It's just like you said. It'd be good if the predecessor was still alive. Even if this gets out we can't count on the administration's help. And that's not all. If this is a new strain of disease, and if it is one that spreads by direct transmission, what do you think's gonna happen?"

"...I don't know."

"Look at what happened with Ebola and you get the idea, don't you? They shut it in. It gets out that there's an unknown epidemic spreading through Sotoba. After that the first thing to do to try to contain it is to isolate it. Sotoba's quarantined, patients are kept from leaking out. If there's no legal basis to do that on, then there's no stopping it from being done in some underhanded fashion. The administration and the Medical Association could collude and move to have Sotoba kept on the down low, handled behind the scenes. That'd be the only way it could go."

"Yes, that's correct."

"Certainly, with that you could protect against it spreading. It's especially valid when it comes to containing an epidemic with as high a fatality rate as this one. But, Sotoba can't be saved like that, Ishida-san. It's like waiting for a fire to burn itself out without sending in a fire truck. If there's not a blade of grass left to burn, the fire might naturally die out but what's that mean for Sotoba?"

Ishida nodded.

"I by no means want to hush up the situation. If it is an infectious disease we're legally required to report, I have that obligation too, and of course the minute it's identified as one I'll report it. If I can convey that it's not spread by direct contact, so there'd be no meaning in closing off Sotoba, we'll pass it up to the administration. But, if the source of the contamination really is in Yamairi, if this's an epidemic that's unique to Sotoba, if it turns out to be directly transmitted, it's going to need to be handled with a certain delicacy."

"I understand what you're saying, Junior Doctor. I understand, but...."

"If it really does spread by direct contact, even I can think of some ways to handle it. There are ways to independently and cooperatively isolate it, ways to announce it indirectly through the Medical Association. I'm promising that it's

going to be handled, so can't you keep it down for just a while for me?"

Ishida hesitated to respond. As if seeing through his hesitation, Toshio looked at Ishida. His voice was somehow penetratingly cold as he lowered his voice to a whisper.

"It'd be better if it spreads outside, Ishida-san. If it's something the administration can't help with anyway. If they personally aren't feeling the heat, they won't do a thing. Unless it's to protect themselves, not a damn thing."

"Junior Doctor."

"Mount Unzen, Okushiri Island, Matsumoto." Toshio murmured as if reciting a chant. "...If you believe the administration will cooperate to help the people at the scene of the tragedy, I'd like to ask your basis for that belief."

Ishida opened his mouth, then, hesitatingly, closed it. Taking in Ishida's silence, Toshio opened the passenger side door. The mists and deafening sound of the rain suddenly flowed in.

"Sorry 'bout this, Ishida-san. I'm counting on you."

"...Yes, sir."

Having gotten out of the car, Toshio bent his body down to speak to Ishida. "And also, could you keep this a secret from Seishin? He's an idealist you know, he can't handle balancing good and evil."

I understand was all Ishida replied.

Cultural Notes

Chapter 1 - 2

But right now without a name to put to the disease, the government won't move. What those guys call an epidemic isn't something spreading around to the people; for them it's a word for an existing contagious disease written into the protocol or manuals.

Epidemics and Japanese Health Laws

Epidemic, densenbyou, literally translates to contagious disease. However not all contagious diseases are legally classified as densenbyou (epidemics) in Japanese. Lay people may use the word translated as "epidemic" to refer to a massively destructive and spreading malady. Medical professionals however would only refer to an "epidemic" as those outlined by the government in the Epidemic Disease Prevention Act, as the word implies specific legal duties on their part. The Epidemic Disease Prevention Act was repealed in 1999 and replaced by the reformed Infectious Disease Control Law. A doctor in the 1990s could accurately declare a contagious disease was not an epidemic (legally), which linguistically would be saying that it was not a contagious disease.

Epidemic Disease Prevention Act

Legal Epidemic Diseases: (cholera, dysentery, typhoid fever, paratyphoid A, smallpox, typhus, scarlet fever, diphtheria, epidemic cerebrospinal meningitis, bubonic plague, Japanese encephalitis). These were reported to the health and town officials, and the patient is to be quarantined for treatment at a cost paid by the government.

Specified epidemic diseases: (polio, Lassa fever). These were diseases designated for treatment identical to the above 11 in the original law.

Required reporting diseases: (influenza, rabies, anthrax, epidemic diarrhea, pertussis (whooping cough), lock jaw, malaria, scrub/Bush typhus, filaria, yellow fever, recurrent fever). These were diseases that physicians were required to report within 24 hours to health officials, and treatment could take place either at home or in an ordinary hospital ward.

The Venereal Disease Prevention Law: (syphilis, gonorrhea, chancroid, lymphogranuloma urethritis). These are to be reported to health officials who passed the numbers to national officials.

The Tuberculosis Control Law: A physician must report diagnosis of tuberculosis within two days and their treatment bill will be paid by the government.

Leprosy Prevention Law: A doctor who diagnoses leprosy must report it within 7 days and the potentially effected patients will be put in a sanatorium at the government's cost. This law was also repealed in 1996, designating leprosy as a Legal Epidemic Disease.

The **Parasitic Disease Prevention Law** was not a part of the Epidemic Disease Prevention Act but is a law stating that the government may spend funds investigating by means of physical examinations or feces exams for signs of parasitic diseases (Roundworm, hookworm, liver flukes, blood flukes (*Schistosoma japonicum*)) and also in providing treatment for them. This law was repealed in November of 1994.

Without counting parasites as a disease (The Parasitic Disease Prevention Law is actually separate from the Epidemic Disease Prevention Law) that leaves 32 diseases that the government required and took action (read: spent money) on. As the government also does spend money on parasite control Ozaki also mentions that, highlighting the limited expectations had for government intervention on any health matter.

Chapter 1 - 5

Ozaki cites three large incidents that warranted the administration's actions, contrasting to Sotoba where he does not believe they will have the same impetus to help the isolated victims.

Mount Unzen

- Volcanos located in Nagasaki which were active from 1990-1995. There was a major eruption in 1991, though due to attention and evacuation orders, the direct on-site casualties were fewer than 50, and primarily made up of scientists and film crews aware of the danger. The emperor and family had come to the site to eat cheap survivor meals such as instantcurry and there was much support provided for victims through various agencies coordinating with the government and independently.

Okushiri Island

- An island in Hokkaido ravaged by an earthquake in 1993, which triggered a tsunami, landslides, and other structural damage. Considerable government funds were spent on rebuilding including building houses on higher grounds, wave defense walls, a tsunami shelter, and memorials to the 200 or so fatal victims.

Matsumoto

- Several terrorist attacks with sarin gas in Matsumoto in June of 1994 are referred to as the Matsumoto Incident. The religious cult Aum Shinrikyou was eventually found guilty of the attacks. Motives including testing it for a future attack that took place in Tokyo later in 1995 and trying to kill the judges overseeing court charges of fraud against the cult to delay the verdict. In response to the attacks the government formed risk and medical management procedures for chemical terrorism and instituted analytical instruments in hospitals and police task forces specifically for incidents of biochemical warfare.

Chapter 2

Part 1

Nao's results that were requested from the Tajima National Health Institute ASAP were delivered to Toshio's hand the following day just before noon. The rain from the night before had lifted. Again, the sunlight poured in, downright annoyingly.

Bringing in the results and the coffee, Ritsuko looked over the waiting room that had become piled with books in such a short time and sighed. Answering Ritsuko's question as to whether the room could be cleaned with a retort to do as she pleased, Toshio looked over the results. He laid them side by side with the simple examination results performed at the hospital yesterday.

It was the same as Megumi's case. All types of blood cells were decreased, as were her hemoglobin and hematocrit levels. Clear signs of anemia. More specifically normocytic normochromic anemia. However, serum bilirubin and LDH levels were normal. With all other values normal, there appeared to be no irregular functioning of the liver or kidney. The results of the Coombs tests were negative. While it was negative, there was no abnormal hemolysis. The same as Megumi. It didn't look like there was anything that could be it besides anemia.

(Is it really simple anemia, or is it...)

Last night, he put the peripheral blood smears and the bone marrow sample under a microscope. The blood smear showed an increased reticulocyte count, as well as nucleated red blood cells. Hyperplasia was occurring in the bone marrow but while Toshio was no hematology specialist he found nothing amiss in its form. There was nothing that could be thought of as abnormal other than the blood production levels. Rather, it'd be better to think of it as a release of young red blood cells due to an expenditure of a large quantity of red blood cells.

(If that's the case)

Was it lost to internal bleeding, or was it quickly destroyed by hemolysis?

(It isn't internal bleeding...)

Neither through palpations nor x-rays were there particular signs of internal bleeding. It didn't look like there was really any swelling of any internal organs either.

(But, I can't think of it as hemolysis either.)

The Coombs tests came back negative. It wasn't autoimmune hemolysis, and looking at the images of the blood smear, it wasn't hemolysis stemming from irregular cell shapes either. With serum bilirubin and LDH levels normal, it really couldn't be thought of as hemolysis.

No matter how many times he thought about it, the more he thought on it, the more each possibility was thoroughly denied. What shouldn't have been happening was happening. Something was strange.

Deep in thought as Toshio was, for a while he didn't realize that Ritsuko who was sorting the mountains of books had asked him something.

"---Doctor, are you listening?"

"Nn? Aa?"

Ritsuko's expression faintly clouded. "Is she that bad, Nao-san?"

"Nah. That's not what it is. I just get the feeling the results have a kinda mismatch with common sense. ---So what about what, now?"

Ritsuko forced a smile. "It wasn't important. I just said it seems that the mountains are crumbling in here and there, aren't they?"

"Heeh?"

"Before, Sagawa-san from Naka-Sotoba had come, for treatment. At the Sagawa Ojii-chan's place, which is built facing the western mountain cliff, that cliff gave out and mud came pouring into the house, he said. He was lamenting how hard it was to clean up."

"Damn---it'd have been just as well if the mud swallowed the whole house

and was done with it."

"Ojii-chan was saying the same himself. The main room was a field of mud but it should have just finished the job, he said. After all, if the whole thing collapses in, it might turn into a crisis."

"You said it."

"The northern mountains might be giving too. I heard noises last night you know. As if explosives were being used, 'boom', like."

"...The northern mountain?"

Yes, Ritsuko nodded. Ritsuko's house was in Kami-Sotoba. Near the base of the northern mountain.

"I think it was the northern mountain. Going by the noises, I wonder if it wasn't a major landslide? But, as the northern mountain is the temple's territory, there wouldn't be anybody there, would there."

That's true, Toshio murmured. Would it be good to let Seishin know? As he thought that, Ritsuko piled up the last book on top of the low table. "I've inserted blank memo sheets into the pages they were open to so you can find where you were again, so don't worry."

Thanks, Toshio said with a forced smile, then calling out to Ritsuko as she made to step out. "Sorry again, Ricchan. Could you call the construction firm and ask about Nao-san's condition for me? It's fine if it's the family rather than her. Anyway, ask how she is, let them know that if she needs a re-examination, even this evening is fine, so be sure to come."

Ritsuko's brows furrowed. "Is it that serious....?"

"It's not for sure it's that bad, I told you that right? The results seem to defy reason in a weird way. I thought we should try re-analyzing her one more time."

Is that so, Ritsuko said, sounding unsatisfied with the explanation. He called out once again to stop Ritsuko who was leaving, holding the tray.

"That's right, Ricchan. One more thing. After the break, before the front desk opens could you call everyone together?"

"Yes?"

"I was thinking we'd add some appointments into the schedule. Not for all the patients, by any means. Just the patients I specify are fine."

"Uhm.... starting tomorrow, is it?"

Toshio nodded. He'd give more precise details when everyone was gathered, so he dismissed, but Ritsuko's expression was somewhat unsettled.

She must be suspicious, Toshio thought. But that's fine, he said to himself. The hospital staff was on the front lines. Sooner or later, they'd notice the unusual circumstances, and furthermore, since they couldn't help but be on the front lines facing the threat, he couldn't leave it hushed up forever.

"What do you think this is about?" Ritsuko asked Yasuyo. Yasuyo looked to Kiyomi, exchanging glances, then gravely nodding.

".....I knew it. I thought something was strange."

That's right, Kiyomi said with a sigh. "I got the feeling he's being clearly protective over the young wife of the Yasumoris, too."

What do you mean? Satoko and Yuki both tilted their heads. Yasuyo resolutely folded her arms.

"What I mean is, aren't there too many dead around? Yuki-chan, you two might not have noticed but, since this August, it's been unusual."

"Has it?"

"It wouldn't be impossible to think that. After all, the patients never came in, all that comes in are notices of their death. And on top of that, early in the mornings. Before we've even come in to work."

Kiyomi nodded. "In Kami-Sotoba, somebody under forty died, didn't they? And then the three in Yamairi."

Aa, Yuki and Satoko nodded.

"And after that, in Shimo-Sotoba, a high school student. From there, Giichi-san, and the mother of the first death."

Eh, Yuki's eyes were wide. "Seven people? Since August began?"

"That's just it. I was sure it was something suspicious. Death does tend to come in mysterious patterns but, no matter how you think about it, these are too many in a row."

"Do you think something's happening?"

Listening to the two of them, Ritsuko nodded as if thoroughly understanding what the older nurses were saying.

"I wonder if it isn't an epidemic. At least, the Junior Doctor may be suspecting it. Patients may be coming in with that from here on, and those patients he would want to give preferential examinations."

"Then, Nao-san is also...."

"The way he's so vigilant on her, he may suspect it."

Yuki and Satoko exchanged worried looks.

"Uhm... I wonder if we'll be all right?"

"Who knows? But, if it's dangerous, the Junior Doctor would tell us wouldn't he? That he isn't saying anything may mean he has no positive proof yet, but for the time being the hospital's all right, isn't it? That person is, even if only in matters like this, a precise and proper doctor."

Kiyomi breathed another sigh. "Either way, it'd be better to use disinfectant and be sure to wear gloves at all times. We have to at least be aware of that much."

Yasuyo nodded. "There's a disease we don't know anything about going around after all.It'll be good if it's not too unusual of one, but."

Part 2

Seishin stopped his car at the shoulder of the road and looked at the note Toshio made. Therein were the listed elements that needed to be investigated.

The deceased's sex, age, occupation. Education history, standard of living.

Household circumstances, particularly if they used well water. Family structure, marital status, their parents ages, birth order, family medical history. The individual's medical history, if they drank, if they smoked, eating habits, customs. Their daily sphere of activity, particularly their actions throughout July. The note was made out like a form, with what was filled out filled out from their death certificates and the family registers but there were many blanks.

If going in the order of the outbreak, the first to contract it were the three in Yamairi. If one believed Mieko's talk of catching it from Gigorou, then Ohkawa Gigorou would be thought of as the first. The estimation of when he would have contracted it was right around the middle of July. If at that time, Gigorou or the others had gone out some place, that place could be thought of as being infected. ----That this could be told quickly by asking the bereaved families was something that Seishin was, at first, optimistic about. So he was, but the conversations weren't so simple.

Murasako Hidemasa had lost his wife, his sister, and his nephew, a total of three people. Indeed there weren't any close relatives remaining in the village. But fortunately, as the three had their funeral services performed by the temple, the contact addresses of the Murasako household were left with them. As they were living in Yamairi, he tried to contact any relatives living in the communities below, or any old people who had been close to them, but the results were futile. Nobody knew what the Murasako couple had been doing lately.

The Murasako family children hadn't by any means cut off ties with their parents but in the end their parents were a part of themselves that they had left behind in Sotoba. They hadn't forgotten them, they weren't estranged, and they certainly hadn't lost their love for them, but they had their own lives. Long ago, they would have returned for Obon and rekindled their connections but with small children there were studies and lessons, reasons not to want to go far from home, and when children were at a more independent age, they then became the ones at home waiting to welcome those children to their own homecoming. As a result, their parents deserted in the country were looked back upon less and less.

"If they had even been in bad health, though," said Hidemasa's daughter. "I

was worried myself, I did peek in on how they were doing, don't you know. Overall the two were healthy, after all. I thought myself I didn't need to worry and, how to put it---I just forgot. I just didn't worry about it anymore."

She harbored a secret regret of not contacting that but in this case, that it wouldn't have helped at all was true.

At any rate, as far as attempting to make contact in regards to the Murasakos, Seishin was---at least in regards to kith and kin---left with no choice but to accept that it would be near impossible to gather information. Never mind being able to ask the questions that would clarify the circumstances, there was a limit to how much he could ask even with a made-up pretense to dress it up under.

That left Ohkawa Gigorou, but... Seishin thought as he drove towards the village road. At least Ohkawa Gigorou had a nephew left in the village. The Ohkawa Liquor Shop's Ohkawa Tomio was that nephew. Under the guise of buying something on an errand, Seishin visited the Ohkawa Liquor Shop.

In the course of conversation, touching upon Gigorou's death, you must dearly miss him, Seishin said trying to direct the talk with Ohkawa.

"Naw, naw," said Ohkawa, his face a mingling of a smile and a grimace as he waved his hand. "He was already at that age, that old man was."

"None the less, were you not surprised?"

"If you're asking about surprises, that was sure a surprise. My old man's older brother suddenly died, and I was told by the police, after all. On top of that, I I try to go up to have a look and he's so rotted he's falling apart, and he's been strewn all over. Well, to say it's not something you get to experience often's sure enough."

That is true, Seishin nodded. "When was the final time that you had been able to meet with Gigorou-san?"

When was that, Ohkawa said tilting his head as he wrapped the bottle of sake. "It's not like we saw each other that much you know? I'm just gonna put it out there, he wasn't exactly a jolly old man, if there was nothing I needed I didn't feel like seeing him. The old man didn't by no means talk to us much either,

when you think, huh he's calling us, it was to say I'm going out so give me your car or pick with up for me, or to say to do this or that for him," Ohkawa said, mouth forming into a pointed frown. "I'm his nephew, I'd think it'd be normal to ask how to make it convenient for me at least. If he stopped into the store unexpectedly once in a while, even if he got something, he didn't pay the bill on it. He didn't think of nothin' but himself. Then on my end, I just couldn't take him talkin' down to me even if he is my uncle. I'm not still some snot nosed brat after all. When I said that, he shouted who do you think I am, I don't have to sit and listen to this, you think I'm a old fart who won't just die already, and went home yelling."

Ohkawa spoke, his huge body rocking with laughter. Seishin frowned at the loud voice as he asked: "Then, you had not met with him just before the incident?"

"Didn't see him. Even before that---'at was early spring wasn't it? Suddenly he comes on in and takes a bottle off the shelf 'n tries to go, I yelled after him to at least bring the damn money to pay for it. I say that and, don't talk about such petty things between relatives, the old fucker says! Relative, relative, he says! I don't ever remember the old man ever helping me out once, don't remember him ever being no use either, is that what you call a relative, I said, took the bottle up out of his hands and pushed him out the front of the shop. I do that, he starts yelling out in front of the shop 'What about you!' I got too pissed off and threw water out at him. Did that, said don't come here again, I'm cutting off our ties, or somethin', I said."

"....Is that so."

"After that, he was incorrigible. Give me your car, go to the JA, he called to say, I slammed the phone down on him and lately the calls stopped coming too. Then suddenly the police call, saying he's kicked the bucket. After all that I'd say I got no obligation to put up for his funeral but I'm the only one of his relatives left. Everyone's either gone and passed or left the village. Like you'd think, not even having a funeral's just too sad, so at the very end I ended up looking after him. I'm a soft hearted guy at the end of the day."

Ohkawa's body quaked with laughter. His wife Kazuko wore a supplicating smile. Seishin, with mixed feelings, paid and let the shop. At the side of the

shop, Ohkawa's son Atsushi was breaking down a cardboard box as if it were an enemy. Giving a light bow to him, he suddenly and rudely faced away. In knee length sweats, his bare leg was wrapped in bandages. Were you injured, he had tried to ask, but he only replied, as if refusing him, that he was bit by a dog. It didn't seem Atsushi was in the mood to speak with Seishin. Unable to find a way to guide the conversation from there, Seishin left the Ohkawa Liquor Shop.

A sigh leaked out. With Ohkawa like that, they couldn't know what Gigorou had been up to. Even outside of the village, Gigorou basically didn't have any relatives he spoke with. He tried to at least ask who Gigorou was close with to Ohkawa, but he responded that "There wasn't no one 'sides the old Murasako pops" bluntly.

Yamairi was isolated, Seishin thought looking at the notes. Not only was it geographically isolated from the six communities below, it was isolated from regional bonds and blood bonds. Indeed, if that weren't the case, they weren't likely to be left behind that deep in the mountains. The three old people who had given up and been given up by so much, huddled together to get by. The three of them died in one fell swoop, everything down to footprints of their life floated away into thin air---

Is this what it means to return to nothingness, Seishin thought. Everything a person amasses and erected, all of it was reduced to its meaningless origins.

---That is why death is so terrifying.

"That's it exactly...."

Part 3

Yasumori Nao was ultimately, on the morning of the 26th, brought into the hospital all but carried in her husbands Mikiyasu's arms. Toshio couldn't help but be astonished with terror. Nao seemed half dazed, looking as if she wouldn't even have been able to walk sufficiently without support.

"Nao-san, how are you feeling?" he asked, but Nao did not answer. Taking great pains she moved her mouth but no reply came forth. First he gave

direction to lie her out on the examining table. As Nao was assisted onto the table by the nurses, Mikiyasu who was attending to her looked incredibly worried as he watched over her.

"Toshio-san, what's the matter with Nao?"

"It's because I don't know that I'm doing a re-examination. The day before yesterday when she came, I told her if she was feeling even a little worse the next day to come in but she didn't come yesterday."

Mikiyasu shook his head. "She didn't say anything about that. When Mom asked the results, she said she was told it was probably anemia."

"Yesterday, how was Nao-san?"

"She slept throughout the day I think. I was at work, so I wasn't with her all day, but. It seemed she had a fever, and she was incredibly tired."

Toshio nodded. Nao's complexion was as poor as ever. The neckline of her sleeveless one piece and her arms looked almost pale blue. On those arms granulated purple spots could be seen. What looked like insect bites were here and there on the nape of her neck and arms, though they may have also been scratches. But, those insect bites looked to be forming pus.

Her breath was shallow, seeming out of breath even lying on the examining table. Checking her pulse, it was incredibly fast. She seemed to have a fever but her limbs were cold, breaking out into a thin, cold sweat.

"Yasuyo-san," Toshio wrote out directions on a memo and called to Yasuyo. "A blood test. She has tachycardia, so just in case take an EKG for me too. Afterwards, tell Shimoyama-san to prepare for a US and a CT."

"Ah--yes sir."

Toshio took Mikiyasu, fretting with a look of suspense, into the waiting room.

"Toshio-san, uhm... What's wrong with Nao?"

"Well, have a seat," Toshio motioned to the sofa.

"Does she have some bad disease?"

"Nah. At least right now, we don't have any proof that she has a particularly

serious disease."

A reliant look rose up on Mikiyasu's thin face. Living in Monzen like him, with their houses nearby and their age close, separated by four years, he was in the category of childhood friend. Toshio, brimming with a competitive spirit, was the boss of the group of kids, so when they were young he was what you could have called one of his henchmen. This is how it had been they were kids. If there was something troubling, he'd look at Toshio as if relying on him.

"But...."

"At the current stage I can't say anything," Toshio said, motioning again for Mikiyasu to sit on the sofa. "How long has Nao-san been unwell?"

"Uhm.... since two or three days ago, I'd say."

"The day before yesterday? Before that?"

"The day before that she was tired. Mom asked plenty of times if she was all right. She said go, go to the hospital."

"And the day before that?"

"How was she.... I don't remember. I don't think it seemed like she felt especially bad or anything then."

"What about you?" Toshio asked, making Mikiyasu blink.

"Me?"

"You, Tokujiro-san, or Atsuko-san, anyone. Or any of the younger guys at the contracting firm. Is there anybody who seemed to be sick the same way? If there were, we might think she caught a summer cold or something from them, but."

Mikiyasu tilted his head and thought, then after some time, answered that he didn't think so.

I see, Toshio sighed. "The day before yesterday when she came in, I did a few different tests but the results said that she had anemia, and that was all that

came from it. Since we're still sorting through it, I want to say she has nothing but anemia. ---But even anemia alone has various types."

Mikiyasu's expression changed.

"That's.... I don't know about it in-depth but, there's pernicious anemia or, like, really bad anemia, isn't there?"

"At least just based on the test results, I don't think it's pernicious anemia or aplastic anemia. It's probably not a problem at the blood formation level. I suspect it's a type of anemia from hemolysis but that's not something I can say for certain."

"Is that especially bad?"

"Oi, oi," Toshio forced himself to show a smile. "It's not like that. To tell the truth, I don't really know. It looks like anemia from hemolysis but I get the feeling it's different from that. It'll be all right to keep an eye on her for a while but, think of the season. She has all the duties of being the young wife of a contractor. There's all the anxieties, having to look after all the young guys coming and going. She has a child on hand to tend to too, and since she's had a sudden drop in energy, let's take care with this, is all I'm saying."

"That's all..." Mikiyasu breathed. "Don't scare me like that, man. Going through the trouble of having a nurse call me, telling me to bring her in, suddenly talking to me about grave sounding test results, I was sure it was...."

"Well, still, until we can put a name to her condition it'd be better not to drop our guard. It's true that she seems really sick and all. Just in case we'll do another blood test and run a CT, and if that doesn't clear anything up, we'll send her to the National Hospital. If I have to I'll write a referral to the University hospital, even."

"Ah..... Mm. Yes."

Toshio was, he dared say, unable to make any difference in Megumi's case. Mikiyasu was relieved but Toshio who had comforted him was not. Nao was getting exceptionally worse. He was throwing vigorous efforts into it, but he was indeed uneasy.

Part 4

Seishin wandered past the side of Chigusa towards the house peering in the entryway. Yano Tae who was watching TV in the living room soon noticed Seishin and called out 'Dear me!'

"Has something happened?"

"I had gone to the town of Mizobe, you see. I had thought to take a short rest at the shop, however, I then thought about how Tae-san may be doing."

"Please do come in," said Tae, then seeming to realize something. "Ah, it would be better to go into the shop. The Junior Monk would prefer coffee to cheap tea, would you not? There is also air conditioning there."

Standing before Seishin and putting on her sandals, Tae who motioned towards the shop somehow seemed thinner.

"Should it happen that you have lost weight?"

Tae looked back as they crossed the sun bathed garden. "It must be summer weight loss. Lately, meals just aren't very appetizing."

"It is not because you are depressed about what had happened with Fuki-san is it?"

Tae blinked as if something had struck her heart and gave a dejected sigh.

"...That isn't what it is, but. After all, I am at an age where it wouldn't be unusual for death to come pay me a visit, either. I am the same age as Fuki-chan, yes? We were classmates in school, you know."

"Is that so?"

"These kind of things are foreordained, yes? That's how I had thought, but. But, the day Fuki-chan died, I met with her, you know. She was sick, and I thought so many times that we should have the Junior Doctor come but Fuki-chan said she was fine, so. But, if I had called the Junior Doctor at that time or if

I had called an ambulance, wouldn't that person have been able to live at least a little longer, I think, yes...?"

"If you think that way..."

Tae shook her head. "No matter what, I can't put it out of my mind. Why didn't I call, I think. Why didn't I do what I could, even if it wouldn't have done any good, don't you think I would wonder? It isn't something I can take back and fix now but, once it came to mind, at that time I, if only I'd done this, that's all I can think about."

Saying so while sounding lonely, Tae opened the door to the shop. There were no signs of customers in the shop. Noticing Seishin and Tae approaching, Kanami bowed her head from behind the counter.

"Welcome. ---I thought I'd seen the Junior Monk's car."

"He had come to see how I was going," Tae said, earning a smile from Kanami.

"Thank you very kindly. ...Mother is really losing heart."

"Oi, oi, I'm getting used to it."

"That's how she is. Even if she is your friend, I don't want you to be pulled along with Fuki-san. Even if you don't rush, Fuki-san will wait for you, I'm sure of it."

Yes, yes, laughed Tae; Seishin saw she and Kanami in a very charming light.

"Tae-san is in a good place now, able to be with Kanami-san like this."

"That's so true," she said, looking delighted. "I'm happy that she came back but I worry since she came back because she divorced."

"If you can be that smart mouthed, there's nothing to worry about, is there," Kanami laughed, putting an iced coffee on the counter and urging it towards him.

"....In Yamairi, the Murasako-sans and Ohkawa-san were very lonely cases. They weren't quite what one would call estranged from their children, but."

Tae nodded sympathetically. "All of the children of the folks up there left the village, didn't they."

"As it was all so sudden, I suppose it's uncertain whether something happened or not. Therefore, I had thought to inquire to the bereaved families as to how the state of things when they were alive, however, nobody is well informed, thus..."

"Well, dear me."

"Fuki-san was the same with only a few minor differences. All alone, as the one that had stayed with her, Shuuji-san, had died. Of course, Fuki-san did have friends, so it was much better, but." Kanami's brows furrowed. "Somehow, it's like the deaths keep coming this year. They say that a lot at the shop you know, that it's a terrible arrangement of fate. Anyway, about Fuki-san's case. Her older brother and son went, then ultimately she herself went. Do you suppose some terrible disease is spreading, is what some are thinking too, you know."

Seishin secretly held his breath. Kanami was watching him intently, but, it seemed that she herself didn't believe those words. A bittersweet smile rose to her face.

"You can't take even a summer cold lightly, huh? Gigorou-san was off, they thought, you know."

"---Ohkawa's?"

"Yes. Now when was that, I wonder? I caught sight of Gigorou-san getting off the bus. He looked sickly, and was wavering awkwardly, you know. I called out to him, but he didn't seem to notice. Then that news of what happened spread. I thought, I knew something was strange back then."

"When might that have been?"

"Wasn't that at the end of July, I suppose?" Kanami looked into the air as if searching her memory. "---Yes, at the end of July. After that, I'd heard that Gigorou-san and Hidemasa-san seemed sick, you know. It seems like it was Mieko-baa-chan who said that when she came down to do some shopping. Getting sick deep in the mountains like that, it'd be scary if it turned serious, I thought, then that's exactly how it went. It's unsettling."

"Can you remember approximately which day?"

Kanami tilted her head. "What day was it, I wonder? I heard that the two

seemed sick, you know. That was when I thought, come to think of it... Just a few days before that, I'd seen Gigorou-san, huh, I thought...."

"It was the very next day that Gigorou-san left," Tae added. "First thing in the morning, he got on the bus saying he was going out somewhere. That next day he came back, so he must have stayed out somewhere overnight, and I remember wondering where he could have gone to."

"You'd said as much," Kanami nodded with a smile. "Mom gets up early. She happened to see Gigorou-san at the bus stop. She said he was at the bus stop headed for Mizobe. Then the next day he came back, she said, on--which day was that, now, I wonder? I heard that he seemed sick. They were talking about that in the shop...." Suddenly, Kanami's brows furrowed. "That's right, when he heard this, Shuuji-san suddenly said he would go to pay a get-well visit."

Seishin felt something had hit him by the heartstrings. "Shuuji-san did?"

"Yeah. Just that night, he came to drink. He'd already drank quite a bit, we told him to give it a rest, but 'I'm fine', he said. He called his house from here to say he was going to be late, since he was paying a get well visit. It was already pretty late, if you go to pay a visit at this hour, you'll just be troubling the patient, won't you, I had thought, but." Kanami said and gave a single nod. "Yes--That's right. Then it was six days later, that we had heard Shuuji-san had died. Shuuji-san hadn't come to the shop since then. It was rare for that person not to come for more than three days straight, so when we were wondering if something happened, it turned out he'd died."

Seishin stared at the grains of the wooden counter. The day Shuuji died was on August 6th. If it was six days before, then that would mean the 31st. On the 31st Shuuji went to Yamairi. But, the 31st---or around the early morning of the 1st was the estimated time of death. If they could believe police opinion, when Shuuji went to Yamairi, there was the possibility that Gigorou had already died. It was likely that Hidemasa and Mieko were also having their outbreak---

Seishin felt unease. Shuuji ultimately might not have met with Hidemasa and Mieko. If he went into the house, he should have noticed that his uncle was in an extraordinarily poor state. If so then naturally he would have called somebody, right? On top of not contacting anybody, Shuuji must have come

back without meeting with Hidemasa but, ---but, Mieko also didn't contact anybody. Her husband was dead beside her and yet she herself died without contacting anybody.

(What is this, this similarity....)

Seishin was caught in his thoughts when Kanami raised her voice to say "That's right. I remember. The day before Gigorou-san went out, that was the day Motoko's child had the accident."

Seishin lifted his face.

"Right, the Junior Monk was at the hospital, weren't you? Shigeki-kun's mother."

"Aa....."

Seishin recalled Motoko's neurotic, erratic state.

"She was in my same class. She helps with the evening preparations. Motoko's child was hit by a car on July 27th, wasn't it? The next day on the 28th was when Gigorou-san went out, and he came back on the 29th. I heard that he was sick, and Shuuji-san went to pay a sick visit, that was six days before he died."

July 31st, Seishin nodded. "Had you seen Gigorou-san before that?"

"The time before that was---when was it, I wonder, when I saw him when he came back, I had thought it had been a while, so I don't think I'd seen him for some time."

"I wonder if Gigorou-san often went out traveling or any such like this?"

To that, Tae shook her head. "Not Gigorou-san. That person rarely left the village. After all, he didn't have any way to get around aside from his scooter. Hidemasa-san had a car but the only one who could drive a car was Hidemasa-san, so I'm sure it was a hassle for him to leave the village, wasn't it?"

"And Hidemasa-san?"

"That person, too, has a heavy bottom, you see. As far as traveling, I think it was pretty rare for him, you know. When was it? Once I met with Mieko-san at Fuki-san's place, and Mieko-san was saying how she'd like to go to a hot springs

once in a while. She was saying 'how many years has it been since we last went on a trip', or something like that."

"I wonder if he had felt like taking a trip this July, or...?"

"He didn't, I don't think. There's the rice fields and the vegetable fields, after all. Those people were living on a pension, they had to cultivate the fields to eat, you know. Maybe if it were a season when farmers could slack, but this wouldn't be the season for them to travel, don't you suppose? And this year especially, see, there hasn't been any rain. They must have had to use the pump and water the fields, people couldn't very well leave their fields at a time like this."

That's true, Seishin thought. This year there was a heatwave and a water shortage. The day before yesterday, there had been rain enough but there was ultimately little effect on the river's water levels. It wasn't too serious a problem for the village but, downstream there wasn't enough water, and even in Sotoba they had to pump water from the rivers and lakes. The village farmers had to draw water from the swamp and wells to spread over the fields. Certainly with things being what they were, they couldn't have gone out traveling anywhere.

Then, thought Seishin. The three were contaminated in Yamairi. Or else----?

Part 5

Toshio's worries bore out. The next day, in the middle of morning examination hours the phone call from Yasumori Mikiyasu came. Nao wasn't breathing, he said while crying. Told to come quickly, when he'd hurried to the contracting firm, Nao was gone. Her pupils were already dilated, and in her mouth the froth of a lung hemorrhage was visible. Pulmonary edema caused by heart failure made choking the cause of death. August 17th, at 11:20.

The one Seishin received word of death from was Tamo Sadaichi. It was late afternoon, Seishin alone in the temple office with his manuscript spread before him, toying with superficial thoughts.

"The contractor's Nao-san has died!" Seishin held in his 'I knew it' at the sound of Sadaichi's voice at the other end of the receiver. Misunderstanding that silence, Sadaichi continued. "Mikiyasu-kun's wife. She was 26, or right around there. It's very sudden. It seems there was a problem with her lungs but, with things what they are, I will be taking charge of the assistants."

"Ah, yes."

The contrators' Yasumori Tokujirou was Monzen's Mourning Crew mediator. During these cases where the mediator's family had a misfortune, the head of the assistants acted as the agent. The head of the assistants wasn't a specifically assigned position but each community had their own rankings of a sort, and who the head of the assistants were was determined with an unspoken sense of agreement.

"The heat is still severe but, as sorry as I am to pressure you, I thought we should try to do the all night vigil tonight. Tokujirou-san's family by blood and marriage live together in this area, so there's nobody who would have to hurry in from far away."

"Yes."

"So with that said, if you could do the bedside sutras as soon as possible."

"I understand. I will speak with the head."

In the same community of Monzen, the Yasumori industries weren't on a lot that far from the temple. The eldest son of the Yasumori industry's Yasumori Tokujirou was the Maruyasu Sawmill's second son. Tokujirou founded the independent Yasumori Contracting firm, going into real estate from construction, with a scope that spread out to public works as well. In the present, the position of successor to the contractor's firm was now Mikiyasu's, with matters of real estate falling to Tokujirou's little brother who lived in the city, and the baton of public works were passed along with the city office to Tokujirou's adopted son-in-law.

It was a country business, and it might not have amounted to much compared to other personal success stories but Tokujirou himself was on the verge of 70 and an ever vigorous person himself still. None the less, when Seishin visited,

that very Tokujirou had seemed beaten down where he sat by his daughter in law's bedside.

"Tokujirou-san, in these trying times...."

When Seishin spoke out to him, he wordlessly bowed his head. He grieved as if he had lost his own true daughter. Sitting in the chief mourner's seat, Mikiyasu held the small child and kept his eyes cast heavily downward. He could hear hidden sobs. Facing him, Setsuko, with red eyes, patiently stroked him.

Nao was his daughter in law, not Tokujirou's daughter. Setsuko was his second wife, so there was no blood between Setsuko and Mikiyasu. None the less, Tokujirou's household was one that anybody could be envious of. Both Mikiyasu and Nao were both like their blood children, Seishin knew he had been told.

"Setsuko-san, Mikiyasu-kun," Seishin spoke to both, going blank when he met the child's gaze, at a loss for words. Nao's first born son was Susume. Indeed he shouldn't have been more than three years old. "--My sincere condolences."

Without understanding the meaning of losing his mother, probably not understanding what was happening around him, Susumu tilted his head; watching his simplistic demeanor, only perfunctory words could come forth. This very young child had lost his mother.

Tokujirou too, and Mikiyasu and Setsuko also seemed unable to let out their voices while holding in their wails. They gathered wordlessly, only bowing their heads deeply.

Seishin again could not make further words come. Seishin turned his eyes to Mikiyasu who let out a sob. His arms tightly holding onto the child were of course protecting the child, but there was something about it that also appeared as if he were clinging to the child in order to support himself. He'd seen an arm like that before. It was like that at the Shimizu house too. That had been tragic, and at the same time it looked foreboding. These people did not realize that something dangerous had entered into their own house.

---Where the children cry, the oni come.

In the village spread 'The Risen;---The legend of the oni were no doubt a

metaphor for a plague. The oni had penetrated the Yasumori family. Those touched by the oni were infected with death, and death spread on out from there.

He felt like telling them to take care. I understand the feeling of wanting to mourn the departed. But, you mustn't cling to the body. Hurry, we have to put the body in the coffin and seal it up. He wanted to confess to everything, to tell them to take proper precautions, but.

But, reason whispered. If this is a plague, it's too late to warn them. Nao was dead. If this death was to continue then the Oni had probably already seized its next sacrifice.

Part 6

That night after the all night vigil at the Yasumori house had ended, Seishin visited Toshio. At that time, Toshio was in his private room just looking over Nao's test results.

"Yo."

Toshio motioned Seishin who came through the rear courtyard as usual to come inside.

"Was Nao-san----as expected?"

To Seishin's question, Toshio nodded.

"Most likely, yeah. Nao-san came into the hospital on the 24th, and died this morning on the 27th. She was sick from the 23rd it seems, which would made it four days until she died. Overall no subjective symptoms but she got tired easily, her head was heavy, and she said she was spacing out. Anyway, as far as the exam went, it was thought to be anemia, and the test results said anemia. Other than the anemia there was nothing particularly wrong."

"That is like Megumi-chan was...."

"Right, the same pattern," Toshio nodded. "Really seemed spaced out, no matter what you asked, she didn't give any answers that hit on anything. Even using her mouth seemed troublesome, or maybe there was more the impression her attentions were diffused and she couldn't get her thoughts in order. This is like Megumi-chan's case, too."

"I see...."

"The blood tests on the 24th didn't show anything out of the ordinary besides the anemia. In normocytic normochromic anemia, all types of blood cells are fewer, looking at the net red blood cell counts. All kidney and liver functions were within normal ranges; we looked for internal bleeding but we didn't find any of that either. On the other hand," Toshio motioned to the results pinned to the medical record. "These are the results from when she came into the hospital on the 26th. They came in today. Looking at this, everything's wrong all over. The kidney and liver functions are hugely out of normal ranges. Her anemia improved some but just the opposite everything but that got worse in exchange, it's like. And this morning she died. Looking at the corpse, she was slightly jaundiced, dropsy, ascites, and had other trends towards blood loss, with signs of liver and renal failure. She presented as if she'd been choking; in truth, when suctioning her respiratory tract, there was a froth of blood from the lungs in her airways. Respiratory failure due to a pulmonary edema due to heart failure. But, we took a EKG of this before too. At least the first time she came into the hospital, there was nothing to show signs of heart failure. There were no problems aside from the anemia, as few as three days before. From there she had a full body breakdown. The cause of death was suffocation from heart failure but, the heart failure itself was just what happened to become the trigger. Looking at the way it progressed, it wouldn't be strange if the liver or kidney or something else became the trigger. Rather than heart failure, it's like MOF---Multiple Organ Failure."

"....The chances of it being an epidemic are?"

"None. At least, according to the test results, they all turn up negative."

"It's that, then, huh...."

"More than likely, yeah. The first problems with her condition were ones you couldn't help but think were her suffering from the summer heat or a summer cold. From there it took a sudden, fatal turn for death but, its transition is obvious. From the time until it turns deadly to the first signs being anemia, it's incredibly similar to Megumi-chan's case."

"It begins with anemia?"

"The odds of that are high, I think. It might've been better to tell Ishida to rewrite the leaflets to say that anemia is common and to be careful. To list anemia's objective symptoms and what it feels like, and to come to the hospital right away if it looks like that."

Seishin nodded.

"I was barely able to ask her, and after asking Mikiyasu and putting it together, it doesn't seem like her original family had any chronic illnesses that fit the bill. Nao-san's real father was a deadbeat, and the ones who raised Nao-san were her uncle and his wife, but anyway as far as what I could get from Mikiyasu, I don't think there were any hereditary problems. I can't think of any particular lifestyle habits she'd had that would be a problem. She was a social drinker, and didn't smoke. She basically stayed in the village during her daily life, and aside from when she might have gone to Yamairi, she didn't go into the mountains. At most she'd go to Mizobe to do some shopping."

Seishin looked at the notebook page where Toshio had written 'Yasumori Nao.' As a doctor he'd asked all he could of the person and the family, and indeed nothing was left unchecked.

"The contractors don't use well water. It's not all from the above ground lines but only the air conditioner in the office uses ground water. It's the same as at the Maruyasu sawmill."

Seishin took notes while nodding. Yamairi didn't have waterworks. Gigorou and the Murasakos both used well water. At the Gotouda household, the drinking water was from the waterworks, but the bath water and laundry used well water. In Shimo-Sotoba where Megumi lived, most houses used waterworks but for farm works ground water was used, and just before Megumi had died she had been seen climbing the western mountains. If she

had a normal habit of going into the mountains like that, she might have drunk water from the swamp there. Putting those lines of thought together, it was possible to think that the source was in the water, but.

".....Wouldn't it be the water?"

"If you think about the contracting firm and Maruyasu, the odds are probably pretty low. The odds of it being something or another polluting the water or some kind of poisoning or contagion have pretty much been whittled down I think. There's still a chance that it might have first gotten to the person through water but water isn't the source of the contamination."

"So for example, the water in Yamairi may have been contaminated, and from there the three in Yamairi were infected, and after that, direct transmission?"

Toshio nodded. "If we say water was the cause, that's what it'd come to but Megumi-chan and Giichi-san are the bottleneck. Thinking of the obvious, I can't think of how Megumi-chan would make contact with Yamairi or the three from there or Shuuji-san. It's just I can't say that for certain."

Seishin nodded. Megumi lived in Shimo-Sotoba but, as they knew from the day she had gone missing, her sphere of activity spanned the upper communities. It wasn't impossible that she met with the three from Yamairi or Shuuji by chance.

"Moreover the one who becomes a problem is Giichi-san. If Nao-san's case is the same thing, I can't think the source was anyone other than Giichi-san. If she was infected in the middle of August, this is right during the time when Giichi-san had died. According to Mikiyasu, Nao-san was always coming and going from the Maruyasu sawmill. She visited Giichi-san for a get-well visit three times or so, and on Bon the whole family was gathered at Maruyasu. Indeed smack in the middle of August. It wouldn't be strange at all for her to have caught it from Giichi-san. But, where Giichi-san would have caught it from I don't know. Giichi-san's sphere of activity was just about nonexistent. He was totally bed ridden, after all. All I can think of is that it's possible one of the three from Yamairi or Shuuji-san had come to meet with Giichi-san but---"

"It doesn't seem so," Seishin shook his head and turned his eye to his notes. "I tried asking Atsuko-san from Maruyasu but it seems Shuuji-san and Giichi-san

had no relations whatsoever. It seems he never set foot in Maruyasu. It wasn't as if the three from Yamairi had no connection to Yamairi at all. Giichi-san did know them but, they weren't especially close. It seems they didn't take the trouble to come visit Giichi-san. If they had business with Maruyasu, they would incidentally pay Giichi-san a sick visit, incidents like that may have happened before, but Giichi-san was sick for a long time. Before, there had been customers who would visit Giichi-san but lately that had petered out, in current times, it seems."

"Seems so. That person'd been stuck in bed for six years or so now. When I came back, he was already bedridden and all."

Seishin nodded. "So, the ones who met with Giichi-san were largely only family members. Particularly the people from the contractors. Also, people from the main Tamo family. Sadaichi-san seemed particularly close to Giichi-san. Then there were a few people he in his inner circle."

"No connection point then.... Is it impossible that it spreads directly after all?" Toshio sighed as if fed up. "---And the others?"

As he was being urged, Seishin opened the folded up notes and presented them.

"For the three in Yamairi and the Gotouda household, their families are spread out and I don't know the specifics. But." Seishin repeated the story he'd heard at Chigusa. That the day before Shuuji fell ill, he'd gone to Yamairi and Gigorou had left Sotoba, that when he'd come back he'd seemed off.

"Shuuji-san went to Yamairi on the second, huh..." Toshio made a sullen face. "That's certainly something. If it was the second, Hidemasa-san should have been dead. Shuuji-san shouldn't have seen a dead body, if he did, he would have called somebody. That he didn't means he visited but didn't see them, but."

"That's right."

"But Mieko-san was there wasn't she? She wasn't doing well and her husband was dead next to her. If she was having a lapse in consciousness due to liver failure, she might have ignored that someone came to visit. It's possible she might have just been asleep, and not noticed that Shuuji-san had come but..."

"Then there's Gigorou-san. ---Say, couldn't we think that Gigorou-san brought something in from outside of Sotoba? And then it was something that Shuuji-san caught in Yamairi."

"I wonder." Toshio twisted his neck. "Of course, there's the incubation period to consider too. For influenza the average time is two days, for cholera, it usually breaks out in a day or two too but. Still, thinking of it like that, where Fuki-san caught it, I wouldn't know."

"That's true. Did Fuki-san catch it from Shuuji-san...."

"I can't say for sure, but. it might be like Japanese encephalitis." When Seishin tilted his head, he continued. "Japanese encephalitis is carried by mosquitoes. It doesn't spread from person to person. If that's the case, there might be that possibility, too."

"Actually," Toshio said poking a finger down on the medical records. "Thinking about it from the end, when the organs all start to break down, it's like something starts in the blood and effects all the other organs. If it comes in through the digestive tracts or the respiratory system, it wouldn't be impossible for the pathogen to invade through the blood, and if that's the case, then at first it may seem to appear as a response to something foreign in the digestive or respiratory systems. But, there's no symptoms of vomiting or diarrhea. If we think of it like this, we can reason that it's a point blank blood-based infection."

"From a wound?"

"Right. Actually, when Megumi-chan fell in the mountains, she had countless little scrapes and scratches. Nao-san didn't have any particular injuries but she had countless mosquito bites. I think there's a possibility it spreads through an animal as an intermediary like Japanese encephalitis. Not person to person, but moquitos or fleas, or ticks as intermediaries. If we consider that, it explains the lack of contact between Megumi-chan and Giichi-san."

That said, Toshio pointed at Seishin. "I can't deny that possibility. You be careful."

"Why?"

"Why?" Toshio said eyes wide in frustration. "Yamairi, right? Megumi-chan was found around the mountains in the Maruyasu back yard. Nao-san's house is a little separated from there but she came and went from the Maruyasu Sawmill. The Maruyasu Sawmill is at the foot of your guys' mountain."

"That.... is true, but?"

"It's all around the northern mountain. There's a chance the intermediary carriers are coming from the northern mountain and spreading out. Yamairi's on the other side of the northern mountain, and Megumi-chan was found just at the place where the northern mountain and western mountain meet up."

Seishin nodded. Certainly in that area the mountain stream flowed towards Yamairi in a loophole shape. When Seishin was small, there was a direct wire line down between the Maruyasu sawmill from Yamairi, a lumber path. As forestry declined, now there wasn't anybody left who used it, and already the path was grown over with underbrush but that path that followed the mountain stream was still plenty cleared enough for animals to use it. ---For example, wild dogs and the like.

Seishin remembered the disastrous scene at Yamairi. "Wild dogs?"

"We could think that way. The dead didn't have any bite wounds while they were alive, so it can't be that the wild dogs are transmitting it but it is possible that the wild dogs have fleas or ticks that do. Just earlier, the Ohkawa Liquor shop's son was bitten by a wild dog. Before that, the Inoda's Motosaburou-san I think it was was attacked by a wild dog. It is true that the wild dogs in the surrounding mountains are multiplying. Those who go into the mountains seem to be tremblingly afraid of it. From the gossip the people who come in for exams say, they've been multiplying in Yamairi and coming down south, it sounds like. There was a patient just recently who mentioned seeing three wild dogs just above the shrine area and all."

"Do you think there's a need to hunt for wild dogs?"

Toshio pondered. "There is a chance the wild dogs are carrying a disease. I'd need to do research..." That said, Toshio let out a huge sigh. "But, the hell'm I supposed to research? If I'm supposed to catch a wild dog and see if it's housing a pathogen or not, then not even knowing what that pathogen is is kinda, well."

"That's true."

"Well, rounding up the wild dogs in the area just in case wouldn't hurt anything but the problem's what kind of reason to give. If we do it carelessly, we might just be stirring the pot but the cause isn't limited to dogs. It's pretty risky."

Seishin nodded. He couldn't deny that the chance to use Ohkawa Atsushi and Inoda Motosaburou's cases as an impetus was long passed. Using those as the reason would seem out of place more than likely.

"This isn't something we can push using the next time someone's attacked as a chance, either."

"But..."

"This isn't just about exposing that there's a plague. It's easy for you to say wild dog hunting but how do you assure the safety of the people actually doing it? The people who go out to round the wild dogs up might be prepared for their teeth but they're not going to be ready for the ticks and fleas are they? If we're going to have them doing that, then we'd need to give them detailed instructions about the plague from the start."

"What about poison bait?"

"That's just changing which part's risky. Let's say the intermediary's fleas. But, once the dog dies, they'll leave its corpse. While we're doing that kind of extermination, unless we have a way to wipe them out too, then instead we won't be able to stop the spread of fleas."

"Is that right," said Seishin, biting his lip.

"Well... the wild dogs might be the ones carrying the disease but, there's the possibility that it's not just them, too. Rats and rabbits, maybe even wild birds. And the fleas and ticks attached to them.

If that's the case," said Toshio, his voice low, "we're going to have a hard time."

Chapter 3

Part 1

On the morning of August 29th, three days from the end of that cursed August, news of another death came before Seishin. Ohta Kenji who lived in Sotoba had died. Ohta was 53 years old, a high school teacher. He collapsed at school, then taken to the municipal hospital and put on a respirator.

“Somehow, things just hadn’t been going well for him,” said Sotoba’s care manager, Murasako Munehide on the phone. “The man himself had been saying his body was sore and he was wanting to retire. But, it was in the middle of the school year, wasn’t it? So they convinced him to hold off on retirement, and suddenly away he goes. It seems his liver had gone bad.”

Is that so, answered Seishin as his thoughts ran in circles. Was this another case of that? Anyway for the time being he made funeral arrangements with Munehide, then Seishin contacted Toshio.

“I think that Ishida-san will be copying the medical certificate but Sotoba’s Ohta Kenji died.”

That right, Toshio said, his reply short. With Nao having died the day before yesterday, this made twelve dead. Seishin hung up the phone and went to visit his father in the separate building.

Watching Seishin leave the temple office, Ikebe looked up at the blackboard.

“Say, Tsurumi-san.” At Ikebe’s voice, Tsurumi lifted his face from the accounting book spread open on the desk. “About this Ohta-san, what kind of person was he?”

“What kind? If I recall, I think he was a high school teacher. I get the feeling I’d heard somewhere that he was a vice principal but.”

“In other words, still before retirement age, correct?”

“That’d be right.”

Not an old man, thought Ikebe. Not an old man to whom it wouldn't be strange for something to happen. Just yesterday, Yasumori Nao's funeral had just concluded, and Ikebe himself couldn't keep track of just how many houses they'd done funerals for since the month had started.

"Don't you think it's kinda strange?"

Mm, was Tsurumi's vague reply.

"Do you think someone like that person would die like that?"

Tsurumi's sturdy shoulder shrugged faintly. These things do happen, he said lowly but, his voice was dyed with an uncertainty. On that note they fell to silence, Ikebe losing his means of continuing the conversation and also falling into silence. Into the strange silence that had settled over the temple office came Mitsuo, morning duties finished and a pot of barley tea in hand.

"—? What's this, are things busy?"

No, Ikebe answered. "There was just a call, it seems there will be another funeral in Sotoba. Ohta-san's."

Mitsuo blinked.

"Ohta—Gousou-san, was it?"

"No, it seems that it was Kenji-san, they are saying."

"Then, his son, was it. ...Whats the world coming to." Mitsuo shook his head and set down the pot.

"There are a lot this year, aren't there?" Ikebe said, earning a large sigh from Mitsuo.

"You said it. Just yesterday, we just finished having the Yasumori's wife's funeral, then today we're having another vigil with another funeral tomorrow. While we're hustling with all this, the forty-ninth day anniversaries and equinoctial weeks are next. It's this heat, just thinking about it makes me dizzy."

"How long to you think this will go on?"

"Who can say? Halfway through next month it'll cool off and things should become a little easier."

“No, that’s not what I....”

From Ikebe’s side as he corrected, Tsurumi’s low voice rose up.

“How long will the deaths continue is what he’s trying to say, Ikebe-kun here. —Right?”

Mitsuo turned to look at the two of them, Ikebe looking uncomfortably at Tsurumi and nodding.

“Since August started, don’t you think something’s odd, Mitsuo-san? Indeed, it is as Ikebe-kun says. I wonder how long this will carry on?”

Aa, Mitsuo said vaguely voicing unpleasant thoughts.

“At the start of August the Gotouda’s son died, and then there was the incident in Yamairi. Even if they were old people, it was three at once. From there, there was the Missy from Shimizu-san’s place and Maruyasu’s Giichi-san, the old woman from Gotouda and the wife of the contractors. On top of that, another—”

“I definitely think there’s a lot, but. After all since August there’ve been seven funerals. Nine dead. It feels like this isn’t normal, doesn’t it?”

“Feels like? Mitsuo-san, this’s, well, really not normal. Isn’t that right? In one month, nine people. Sure, this year it’s been, like, hot. But hot summers cold winters, it isn’t like we’ve never had them like this before. All the same nine people in one month, is that something you can remember happening?”

That’s, Mitsuo said, caught up in his words. To tell the truth, Mitsuo himself realized something was strange. Deaths were things that came in mysterious successions but, he couldn’t remember any that continued to this extent.

“Certainly, there aren’t any that come to mind until now that have gone on like this.”

“Right? But, lately I’d been thinking, you know? And I remembered something similar to this.”

Eh, said Mitsuo turning to look back at Tsurumi.

“Mitsuo-san, do not you remember too? My father and yours were temple monks, so we’ve been coming to the temple since we were kids. One funeral set

up after another, the temple dancing with activity, had happened a long, long time ago.”

Mitsuo held in a small breath. Yes, certainly he had said. It was the season when Mitsuo had only just graduated from elementary school. At first he was happy when his dad kept coming home with packed leftovers from meals exchanged between parishioners and the priests, but he remembered becoming gradually disconcerted.

“But even then there weren’t this many. —No, remembering it now, I seem to think it felt like it was about this much, but actually wasn’t it far fewer?”

“Aa... That’s right, isn’t it? It was.”

Hearing that, Ikebe’s mouth crumpled as if in relief. “What? Even if it’s rare, these things do happen, don’t they?”

Tsurumi nodded with a melancholy expression at Ikebe who had spoke as if relieved.

“Yes,.... it was during the Asia Flu season.”

Ikebe’s face became stuff just then. “Asia Flu... the mass spread of the flu?”

“Aa. It was terrible then. People were dropping like flies. There were few enough dead that you could still keep track of it, but back then the temple felt about like it does now, at least to me.”

Mitsuo nodded.

Then, said Ikebe, his pallor changing. “It can’t be that this time, too—an epidemic?”

Tsurumi had no answer to this, crossing his arms and looking to Mitsuo.

“These days, the Junior Monk’s been meeting face to face with the Ozaki’s Junior Doctor over something or other. Putting aside his novel work to go for walks, he’s been investigating around this or that.Isn’t that what’s been happening?”

“Then, Father, if you please.”

With words of gratitude to his father from his sickbed bedside, Seishin left

Shinmei's room. His mother who had come to clear away breakfast closed the door and breathed a sigh.

"Whatever could be happening, I wonder. This year has been nothing but funerals, it's hurting my head."

Yes, Seishin replied noncommittally.

"Is this what they call 'a lucky year' I wonder? You please be careful as well. Don't push yourself too much."

"I understand." Seishin said, separating from Miwako as she went towards the kitchen in the main wing of the house. Heading back down the hallway to return to the office, Mitsuo was waiting halfway there for him with an uneasy expression.

"Ah—Mitsuo-san, actually,"

Have you heard, Mitsuo said with a grave expression.

"Is this about Ohta-san's son, I wonder?"

"Yes. Ohta-san will be buried on our lots, so we will be depending on you. The funeral will also be handled by the temple, so."

Mitsuo nodded, then lightly took Seishin's arm.

"Junior Monk, what is happening?"

"What—?"

"Tsurumi-san was saying that things haven't been like this since the Asia Flu."

Seishin was stuck for an answer. Mitsuo couldn't go forever without noticing things were not normal. Of course, he was certain that he would eventually say to him that things were strange but he didn't think he would strike at the heart of the matter so quickly.

"I see... The Asia Flu...."

"Is it some kind of terrible disease? What you've been talking incessantly with the Ozaki's Junior Doctor about lately, is it..."

Seishin interrupted Mitsuo. "Mitsuo-san, may I have you keep this topic quiet for a time for me?"

“But,”

“To tell the truth, Toshio doesn’t understand it well himself. It looks like a contagion but I was told by Toshio that it doesn’t match the symptoms of any existing epidemic. Of course, we can’t say that with that alone it is not an epidemic but we are investigating the matter now.”

“Then—after all.”

“We’re trying to investigate whether it is an epidemic or not, so at this point we cannot say a single thing for certain. At any rate, we are thinking of ways to handle this, consulting with the health official Ishida-san and through Ishida-san the Health Department as well as Kanemasa, so for a time if you could not speak of this with the parish families.”

“That’s... If the Junior Monk says so, I’ll stay quiet, but.”

“Please. If it is truly an epidemic, if we idly stir everybody into a panic, the disease will spread all the worse. Until I say that it is allowed, please be sure not to spread word.”

Mitsuo nodded reluctantly, then in a sudden breath lifted his face.

“Acknowledged. I will tell Tsurumi-san and Ikebe-kun the same instructions. Please have peace of mind regarding this much.”

Seishin lowered his head. He was thankful for Mitsuo’s trust. Watching over Mitsuo as he left, ‘still’, a part of Seishin thought, with a lingering sentiment of guilt.

Neither Mitsuo nor Tsurumi could know the true death count. This was because the news of deaths of those not of the parish did not reach their ears. To Mitsuo and the others, Ohta made the ninth death. Yet all the same the true death toll was twelve. And furthermore out of those twelve almost all of them went to an acute onset. A few days before they looked to be in good health but, suddenly, death. Twelve cases and counting. He wondered if Mitsuo would smile at him like that if he knew.

Part 2

And so it came to be that by the sin of slaughtering his little brother he was exiled to wander the wasteland. Never to return to that splendor, roaming the desolate earth, yet that sin followed him over the wastelands. His sin was the form of his little brother who had become a Shiki; it followed him, to make him suffer for an eternity.

No, where his brother's aims lied, he did not know. All the more did it pile onto his sufferings. As to why, it was because he did in his own way love his little brother, and he loathed his momentary impulse. His little brother was systematically favored. Deep with love, knowing compassion, like a vessel of splendor to others was his little brother. The people loved his little brother and longed for him. He, too, could not but. The people detested he who had fatally wounded the soul of such deep love but, he again in that same pattern detested himself.

His little brother's eyes of compassion turned on him endlessly cascaded his guilt and regret. His sadness at losing his brother, the lamentations over that death, his hatred of the deceased, his hatred of his own sin compounded his own unyielding selfloathing. Sadness and deterioration, sharper than the frozen winds, tore at him for infinity.

Seishin sighed and threw out the manuscript he had read. The mood wasn't coming to him at all. His pen strokes were superficial and repetitive, his consciousness idling back around to the memos.

Giving in and putting up the Japanese writing paper, he put it away into the drawer. Arranging it face down and placing a paperweight on them, in exchange he took out the notebook from another drawer. Gotouda Shuuji, Ohkawa Gigorou, Murasako Hidemasa, ten people. And newly added, Yasumori Nao and Ohta Kenji. Even now as he did this, it was spreading out somewhere through Sotoba. They were being slowly driven to a cliff's edge but Seishin and the others couldn't sense its movements.

(Is it all right to be doing this now?)

Seishin had no qualifications to investigate the situation. Unable to even allude to the situation, there was a limit to how much he could ask people in conversation. As expected, it was best to pass it on even a step sooner if

possible to the appropriate source, wouldn't it? So he felt. Even Toshio might have been a doctor but he was not an epidemiologist. Rather than an amateur doctor and a complete layman floundering about, he thought the obvious thing to do was quickly entrust it to a specialist in order to discern the situation and cope with it.

But, thought the other party.

If a specialist investigated the circumstances it would be fast work but, the probability that the circumstances would worsen was indeed high. If they knew it was a plague, the villagers would be uneasy. Am I, is my family all right? The uneasy villagers would, without a doubt, go to the Ozaki clinic. To get comfort from Toshio. The more people acted like that in tandem, the more the situation would spread. Not only would they have needless anxiety, they wouldn't be able to help drawing in unnecessary anxiety.

(No...)

To begin with, it wasn't yet even determined for certain that it was an epidemic. They didn't by any means have a solid handle on what was happening. There was the feeling it was a plague, the thought that it couldn't be, the unease that came from thinking 'if', and the irritation at being unable to confirm any one of those things.

As he stared at the notes in thought, the phone rang. Seishin looked behind him over the back of the office chair, pulling the phone on the office desk towards himself. On the other end was the bookstore's Tashiro.

"Ah, Masa-san."

It has been a while, Seishin tried to say as Tashiro interrupted.

"Seishin, have you heard? The resident officer Takami-san died, they said."

Eh, Seishin's eyes widened.

"--Takami-san? It can't be."

"That's, but it's true! This evening an ambulance came. Wondering what was up I went out to the front of the shop, and Takami-san was being carried out

from the police substation."

Takami's wife, Hideko, had boarded the ambulance too. There were two children at Takami's place but when he asked them, Takami had suddenly collapsed they said. Since yesterday he had had a cold and was laid up in bed but he went to go to the bathroom when it seems he fainted. At any rate, unable to leave the kids alone, Tashiro Rumi stayed at the residential station to watch over them but not long after Takami Hideko returned. When asked what happened, she answered that Takami had died.

"Anyways, his wife seemed spaced out, ---like she was distracted, could you say? She wasn't in a state to ask her for details. I mean, I don't know the particulars but you guys have a deep connection with Takami-sam too, so I thought it'd be better to let you know."

Seishin swallowed down something bitter. "He had a cold and was bedridden?"

"Mm. Seems like it." Said Tashiro, his voice not inviting any particular unease. But, Seishi could feel the sweat rising up. ---A bad premonition.

"Those guys though, you know, even if they lived in the substation, they're not from Sotoba. They're not in a funeral group, I was wondering what we'd do."

"That... is true, isn't it."

"Either way I'd say we'd help if it came to it but, anyway for the time being, we contacted the family and the family said they'd take care of it. Probably they'll ask a funeral home in Mizobe and have him cremated, I guess, huh? Anyway, his wife herself was saying to leave her alone, so Rumi and me came back, but."

"Thank you very much. At any rate, I will contact his wife."

Yeah, if you could, said Tashiro, hanging up the phone.

Seishin immediately phoned the substation. But, listening to it ring fifteen times, there was no answer. Did they leave to go to the hospital? Hanging up the receiver, he made another call, to Toshio. He tried to the hospital---which after hours and on days off switched to the house line--but Toshio did not pick

up. Hesitating a moment then calling the house line, Takae picked up and answered, voice nasal and stiff, that he was out.

"Would you happen to know to where he had set out?"

"I don't. There was a call at the hospital, and then he left. Wouldn't it be a house call?"

It was possible that it was a call conveying news of Takami's death. So he might have gone out to the substation. While hesitating on whether he should try going there, there was a call from Toshio.

In the background there were the sound of people making a fuss and he could faintly hear Dixie. It seemed he was calling from creole.

As expected, Toshio hurried to the substation. And when he did, there was nobody at the substation, he said.

"People from around said they say the wide take the kids in the car. They may have gone to get the body or to drop the kids off at her parents place, something like that."

Right, Seishin answered but, somehow he wasn't fully convinced.

"Anyway, I don't know any specifics. I won't until his wife comes back."

That's true, Seishin answered before lowering his voice. "---Do you think it's that?"

Toshio's voice lowered all the more.

"Probably, yeah."

Part 3

They were entering the calendar month of September but she didn't think that the lingering summer heat was abating in the slightest.

As Ritsuko left the hospital, a heat haze reflected off of the parking lot baking in the midday sun. There may have been some moisture in the air recently; it was sultry as if boiling.

"Uwa--, it's hot!" Yuuki said, hurrying towards her car, a toy like Forme. The

car's window was left open. It wasn't like there was anyone who'd steal a car in Sotoba anyway.

"Ritsuko-san, it's hot, is that all right?"

"It's fine," Ritsuko answered. When Ritsuko said she was going to go out to the shopping district a bit and would be back, Yuki had said that if that was the case, she'd give her a ride halfway there. The car that had been scorching in the parking lot was probably hotter than the road top but it was far better than walking beneath the scorching hot rays.

Gratefully getting into the car, she was taken to the edge of the shopping district. First deciding to have lunch, she opened the door to creole.

She took in a relieved breath at the soft sounds of piano and the air conditioned air. From here to the hospital didn't even take ten minutes by car. Due to that, the car's air conditioning didn't have time to start working, and in just that amount of time the back of her blouse was wet.

"Good day."

"Ah, Ricchan."

Hasegawa, almost as if he had been expecting her, raised his face eagerly. At the counter sat the book store's Tashiro. Hasegawa invited Ritsuko to the seat next to him.

"You came at a good time. Ricchan, have you heard from the doctor about what happened at Takami-san's place?"

"Takami-san---the resident officer? No."

She heard the story that Takami had died. With that the nurses felt all the more uneasy. But beyond that, she didn't remember hearing what happened to Takami.

"Really? The Junior Doctor is no the crime prevention committee and all. I thought you might've heard something, but. Coffee?"

"Iced. And a lunch special. ---What happened to Takami-san?"

That's, started Hasegawa exchanging looks with Tashiro. The one to talk was Tashiro.

"They moved, Takami-san."

Ritsuko tilted her head.

"I mean, at Takami-san's place, I haven't caught sight of his wife since then. Takami-san died, she came back from the hospital and said that. Then with that she took the kids somewhere at night and hasn't been back to the house. We were thinking if she needed help with the funeral or something, we'd lend a hand and all, and even if they didn't need help, we should at least light an incense stick for him, I'd thought. But since then we haven't seen her at all."

"My...."

"Then, last night, suddenly there's a light on in the house. ---Well, that's just what I'd heard from the neighbors when I got back to the house, but. Just when I thought they'd finally come back, there's a Takasago pine moving truck in front of the station, no sign of the wife and kids, and a young guy I'd never seen before."

"Were they a moving company? It can't be, they moved? At night?"

"That's right. And at a pretty late hour. It was Mori-san from the pharmacy who saw it, and he said we're talking around twelve o'clock."

"That late at night, was it?"

"Mm. That young guy---he's called Sasaki but anyway it looks like he's the replacement. Takami-san in the end seems to have gone back to his home for the funeral. So, his successor was picked and moved in. It seems like that Sasaki was asked by his wife to take care of the move. Even so, they moved out the clothes and the personal stuff but, like, the furniture was just left where it was. Sasaki-san said it was passed on for him to use, it seems."

"It's all so sudden, isn't it."

"Ain't it? No greetings to anyone around, it was a shock. We were all looked after by Takami-san, we were all waiting for a chance to see him off in a way, like."

And furthermore, said Hasegawa following up on Tashiro.

"This successor called Sasaki had a weird feeling to him. How to put it---his

eyes were fixed, and he didn't have a very good countenance to him, it seems. So, Mori-san, for a moment, thought that talk of being his replacement was made up or something. At any rate, it seems he's single, he said."

Is that so, Ritsuko murmured. "I wonder if a replacement would be decided on this quickly."

While listening to Hasegawa say, that's right, in her mind,

Ritsuko tilted her head.

It wasn't completely random by any means. But still something about it was very queer. A sudden move, and in the dead of night. And Takami's family wasn't there, a stranger was standing in. Leaving the furniture, carrying out the luggage, boarding it on the truck----

Vaguely imagining the state of affairs, Ritsuko spoke to herself.

"Takasago pine...."

There was a crest with that Takasago pine on it wasn't there? ---Takasago Movers. She remembered hearing that name.

"Hm?"

Urged by Tashiro, Ritsuko spoke. "Takasago pine, that's Takasago Movers, isn't it?"

"You know them? I guess they're a famous moving company."

"That isn't it.... In our neighborhood recently there was a move. It was in one day, so it was very sudden."

The mother and child Shinoda from Kami-Sotoba had moved.

"It's a similar story. In the middle of the night, a truck pulled in, and suddenly, they had moved. Without any words of parting to the neighbors. It was so sudden, there were even people wondering if they were running away from something in the middle of the night."

"Heeh. That really is a similar story."

"That was Takasago Moving after all, I was thinking. The name is so auspicious, using it to flee into the night, we had been saying."

"Takasago Moving?"

Yes, Ritsuko nodded. "It's a strange symbol isn't it, that. Is it possible that they're movers who only work at night, I wonder." Saying that, Ritsuko seemed to laugh at her own words. "...That can't be, there's no such thing."

Hasegawa and Tashiro, even while laughing exchange bewilgered glances. Here you are, said Hasegawa, serving up a salad.

"This place is somewhat strange, this village. Whether it be strange moves or strange outsiders." Saying that, Hasegawa wore a wry smile as if remembering that he himself was an outsider.

"Come to think of it, Kanemasa moved in in the middle of the night, too. Is it becoming a fad, I wonder?"

"It couldn't be. ...And on top of that, the deaths keep coming. Shimizu-san's place's Megumi-chan and Takami-san, in succession, aren't they? Hirosawa-san was saying that the mourning crew's work kept coming."

Without thinking, Ritsuko found herself staring back at Hasegawa. For a moment, she had thought Hasegawa had said it like it was a joke. But Hasegawa's face that she stared into was quite serious. It really did feel unease. ----But.

As if remembering something in looking at Ritsuko's face, Hasegawa waved his hand. "Aa, right, right. Yamairi, you know. In Yamairi, the elderly died, didn't they."

Ritsuko swallowed a breath. Those weren't the only ones who died. Hasegawa didn't know. It was understandable, if you didn't know them, you wouldn't receive notice of their death. So not knowing about Gotouda Shuuji or his mother Fuki's death was natural, and not knowing about Yasumori Giichi or Yasumori Nao's deaths might have been as much of a given as given could be. It might have been overheard somewhere but it wouldn't stick in one's memory, likely.

(That's not all.)

Without thinking, a taste developed in Ritsuko's mouth. Gotouda Shuuji, Fuki, Yasumori Giichi, Nao, the three in Yamairi and Megumi, plus Takami made for a sum of nine people. That number was abnormal.

--But, even Ritsuko who thought as much didn't by any means know the true count.

Part 4

Toshio was awakened by the phone. Eyes open, he didn't have the resolve to get up out of the bed. An early morning phone call was a death notice. That was what Toshio learned this summer.

"---Yes?"

When he answered, what was in the back of Toshio's mind was not 'Something happened, didn't it?' but instead 'Someone died, didn't they?'

On the 29th he heard that Ohta Kenji died from Seishin. The next day, on the 30th, Takami's death notice came in. After that, the day before yesterday, the 5th, he had just been contacted by Ishida saying that on the 4th Saeki Akira in Sotoba died.

"This is Yasumori, the contractors."

The one on the other end of the phone was the contractor's Setsuko. Then, somebody caught it from Nao, Toshio thought. What's happened, he asked, but this was nothing more than an empty sound put out into the conversation to convey that he understood.

"Susumu---something is wrong with my grandson. He's limp, even if we shake him his eyes won't open. He's blue..."

"I'll be right there. In the mean time, call an ambulance."

Hanging up the phone on Setsuko's tear-mingled voice saying 'yes' Toshio got dressed. When he rushed out of the house and sped by car to the contractor's firm, Susumu was still breathing.

His breath was shallow and fast. Rather than being short of breath, it was clear he was hyperventilating. In the middle of treating him his breath stopped. Acidosis from hyperventilation, probably. When Toshio confirmed that his heart had stopped, the ambulance finally arrived.

"His heart's stopped. Just now, hurry!" he instructed to the ambulance crew. She must have heard that, as Setsuko's voice cried out in a loud wail.

"Susumu---is he dead?" Yasumori Tokujiro clung to him with a shaking hand.

"It isn't impossible for him to be resuscitated yet." While answering, Toshio's brows furrowed. Setsuko and Tokujirou were in a frenzy over their grandson. His all important father himself, Mikiyasu, watched over that with oddly glazed eyes. He didn't seem to be dismayed in the slightest.

"Mikiyasu, you all right?"

Leaving Susumu to the ambulance crew, Toshio went to Mikiyasu's side. Losing his wife and his child in the course of one summer---he was a man who was losing everything. But, Mikiyasu's expression showed no change. A vacant, absent-minded stare leveled over his son.

"Mikiyasu, ---oi."

As if trying to convey something, Mikiyasu nodded.

"You, how're you feeling?"

Mikiyasu nodded mechanically, then, as if suddenly remembering to do so, murmured.

"Is Susumu, dead, Toshio-san?"

While hesitant to answer with yes or to answer with no, Toshio peered at Mikiyasu's face. The strange look in his eyes must have been because of the blued nature of the whites of his eyes. Looking at him up close, his breath was shallow. Taking his pulse, it was clear he had tachycardia.

"Mikiyasu."

"Toshio-san, last night, like..." Mikiyasu's mouth faintly frowned, his eyes still vacant. "Susumu talked in his sleep. Mama, he said." He murmured in a disinterested voice. "Then he woke up. Those.... were the last words I'll hear

from Susumu, I guess..."

Toshio gripped Mikiyasu's hand. His fingertips were cold. His arm in his lap had nodes here and there on them that looked the same as Nao's.

"Wait a sec," Toshio turned back, calling to stop the ambulance personnel carrying Susumu out. "Him too. Take this guy to the National Hospital."

Tokujiro and Setsuko who were following Susume out stopped and turned.

"Junior Doctor---"

"I don't know the details but tell them out there that he has aplastic anemia or acute leukemia."

The EMS crew looked at each other in surprise and brought in the stretcher. In the mean time, Toshio took out a syringe.

"Mikiyasu, put out your arm."

As if he weren't the first to be doing this, the left arm with the tourniquet already had nodes over the veins. Avoiding those he stabbed the needle in and withdrew a peripheral blood sample.

"Junior Doctor, is Mikiyasu---"

Toshio looked into Tokujiro's panicked face.

"It's not confirmed or anything. It's just in a worst case scenario, that might be the case."

"But..."

"It's just a precaution. ---Now, go with Susumu-kun and Mikiyasu."

Toshio took the peripheral blood sample back and sent out half of it to the Yajima Health Institute for testing, affixing a label to it and storing it safely. The other half he took towards the examination room. His hematocrit values were down, hemoglobin concentration decreased, clearly anemia, but by looking at the smear sample, the erythrocyte count was high.

"...It's that."

"---Susumu-kun? The contractor's boy?"

While changing into her nurse's uniform, Yasuyo's eyes were wide. Ritsuko nodded.

"It seems like it was this morning. Mikiyasu-san appeared to be sick too, so he was transported to the National Hospital in Mizobe."

I see, said Yasuyo, in a low voice mixed with a sigh she couldn't help. Nagata Kiyomi let out a deep sigh as she affixed her nurse's cap in her hair.

"...The poor things. But, this is shaping up to be the real thing."

"It sure is," Yasuyo nodded. "The wife, the son, and the husband in a row. It's an epidemic."

Kiyomi nodded. "It's been on my mind for a while, so I'd been turning books inside out, but I can't figure out what it is. No matter how you look at it, it seems suspicious, but each one I've looked at seems different from this one."

"We aren't doctors, after all.But, it doesn't show many symptoms, does it?"

Yasuyo who answered looked as if she too had researched and researched with no results.

"I wonder if we'll be all right?"

To Ritsuko's question, Yasuyo gave an utterly uninvolved seeming smile.

"It's no use the bunch of us getting worried. The Junior Doctor is well aware. We'll be fine if we just work as the Junior Doctor says. That's our job, after all! But, well, I hope nothing terrible happens, still."

"I hope we can keep it under control," Kiyomi said once again with a sigh. "If we don't handle this well, it's going to get even busier, ... from here on."

"I'm not grateful for it, but that's the job so it can't be helped. If there are patients, we follow the doctor's orders, that's our duty. If the doctor feels like he's managing somehow, then we can't very well say that it's too mysterious and we don't know so we're running away, now can we?"

That's true, Kiyomi smiled. Ritsuko, too, somehow managed a smile. They were the nurses with seniority, so that they were so firm was reassuring. They were firm in what they must do, enough so to brag about it.

"I'm sorry. I just became a little panicked."

Yasuyo gave a carefree smile. "That's bound to happen. Well, just be sure to eat well and keep up your strength. If you don't take care of yourself, you'll lose this test of strength!"

"I wonder if we might lose weight?"

At Kiyomi's interruption, Yasuyo gave a hearty laugh.

"Well, that would be a plus. ---But, while we might become shapely, Ricchan would probably just become a stick."

Ritsuko smiled. "Surely if that happens, the doctor will become nothing but a shadow."

"Without a doubt!"

Laughing, Ritsuko came out of the locker room towards the break room. That was when the part timer Miki called out to stop her. Behind Miki, Fujou lingered looking uneasy.

"Uhm, say, Ricchan, we had heard that the contractor's boy had died, but."

"It seems like he did, didn't he."

"I wonder if things are all right. ... I mean, doesn't it seem like we keep hearing about all these deaths?"

Fujou seconded her, flustered. "I wonder if some terrible disease isn't spreading. We have a small grand child at my house, too..."

Ritsuko smiled. "I think that the doctor is aware of what is happening. If you can't help worrying, then perhaps we should try consulting the doctor about it?"

"Ah, ... that's right."

Miki murmured, turning back towards Fujou. Fujou nodded but did not seem satisfied.

"If you would like, I could convey to him that Miki-san and the others are worried for you."

"If you would be such a dear."

Miki and Fujou bowed their heads to her.

"The doctor has not said anything yet, but just in case, please be careful when taking out the medical waste."

The two nodded as if clinging to her words.

Part 5

Seishin lit the fire in the lamp. The dark light shone over the inside of the abandoned church building.

The old style oil lamp was something that had been left behind here. Not just the lamp, the personal items belonging to the recluse who had formerly lived inside the church were all left behind. Clothing smeared in dust and mouse droppings, books rotting with mold, everything that had come to comfort him for use in his daily life.

The reason Seishin had originally started coming here was because of these things, because Seishin enjoyed reading over the things offered up by the person who dedicated himself here to living out his own individualistic faith in this sanctuary. He would chip at them uniformly, though he couldn't follow any chain of reasoning that would really give a gap into a single certain personality, but he sought out the meaning behind each and every article, taking great interest in the task of seeking out whether one item would reveal the meaning to another and tie something together.

Books on black magic and curses, another was a book on history, a dubious religious pamphlet. Mixed in with those were physics and biology books, and mixed in with those were guileless moral stories aimed at children.

He didn't know what he was thinking amassing this collection of books. Just--- thought Seishin. There was no doubt that he admired martyrs. He wanted to be a martyr to something and yet what to actually become a martyr for, he himself may not have even known. He had been here always, searching for a divinity to which to devote himself. If that wasn't the case, then he may have been seeking

the words to express the personal god he had found through his own intuition.

He was drug out of here and brought back, and, he thought, he probably couldn't find what he was looking for there. When he had first discovered this place, he had sought out information on the person who had lived in Kanemasa but in the chaos after the war he had gone missing and today still what had become of him after that remained unknown. If he had found the divinity which he was meant to serve, he wanted to know about it, he thought.

While thinking on that, he opened a spotted book, when he'd heard a soft clattering sound. In the light of the lamp, he turned his gaze towards the entrance where the sound had been made, seeing Sunako's face peeking in.

"---Muroi-san?"

Seishin closed the book, surprised. Sunako came towards the bench with a light stepped gait.

"I had seen the light and thought that it might have been you. I could see from the window of my house."

"Ah, I see."

"Do you remember your promise? I have brought the book. I wonder if I could have you sign it for me?"

Seishin nodded and took in hand the book Sunako had brought out. It was the second book Seishin had published. It was still a well bound book, but this book shouldn't have been in circulation any longer. Had it been treated with so much care? Opening the book, he signed the flyleaf page. It was something of a rarity but the people of the parish had often asked for his signature, though lately they did not. He found himself a little self-conscious.

"Thank you. I'll treasure it."

The lamp light shone over the happily smiling little girl's face.

After meeting last time, he'd tried researching about SLE. Systemic lupus erythematosus. In Japan it was classified as a collagen disease but more precisely it was a type of connective tissue disease. That said, Seishin couldn't imagine very concretely what kind of connective tissue it was. There were many

young women with it, as most of the patients inflicted were female. It seemed it was something that could be passed down through the family but it seemed it wasn't clear if it was genetic or not. The primary symptoms were characteristic red spots on the skin and joint pain for this illness but it afflicted the entire body. A particular problem was decreased kidney function and decreased cardio-pulmonary function. There was full body weakness and a tendency towards infection, and lesions in the brain and nervous system could also happen. They were sensitive to ultraviolet rays, which could lead to an outbreak, which could lead to serious illness, kidney decline and cardio-pulmonary decline leading to uremia, valvular diseases, and inflammation of the pericardium, which could become life threatening. Abnormalities in the immune system was the designated cause but what caused the outbreaks was unclear, and there was no set medical treatment. Forced to battle the illness all throughout one's life, because returning to society or work was difficult, it was designated as an incurable disease.

Maybe it was because he knew that, maybe it was because of the unsteady light of the lamp, a melancholy shadow seemed to settle over the little girl's face.

"Your complexion looks poor."

"Does it? ---I suppose it may. For a while I was bedridden."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm already quite used to it."

The little girl faintly shrugged her shoulders. Her pale white skin looked sickly but there were no signs of the characteristic red spots. It seemed the primary medical treatment for SLE was steroids, and taking doses of it for a long time could have severe side effects but for the time being Sunako didn't have the well known side effect characteristics of a full moon face or a the outward appearance of a buffalo. Aside from a poor complexion, she looked quite healthy. He wrote that off as being how it looked to a layman's eyes.

But, Seishin thought. Sunako's life was hanging upon a delicate balance. Yes, life was fragile, more so than people believed. Yasumori Susumu had died. It was possible that Mikiyasu, too, would not come back alive.

(Mikiyasu... ...)

Four years younger, he lived nearby. The temple and the Yasumoris had a deep connection. When they were smaller, they often played together. You could even call him a childhood friend.

That summer, many villagers died. There were those he knew and those he did not. But as for somebody like Mikiyasu, it was the first time someone he felt a co-ownership with had fallen. If it was that, then Mikiyasu wouldn't be saved. The last time they met would be at Nao's funeral, then? It was possible that he would never see Mikiyasu alive again. The next time they met, Mikiyasu would be an empty shell, and he would be the ones performing the last rites over that Mikiyasu's empty shell.

"Did somebody die again?"

Asked by Sunako, Seishin returned to his senses.

"... ... Why?"

"Because you were like this before, too. You said that some young girl had died. Muroi-san looks to be depressed the same as he had been at that time."

I see, Seishin forced a smile.

"A person of the parish?"

"Yes,"

Seishin nodded.

"He hasn't died yet. But... ...he's on the verge of death."

Was it all right to say that? But, there was no hope at all of him recovering.

"He is a member of the parish but, if I had to label him, I should probably go with childhood friend."

"Heeh?"

Seishin took a small, short breath.

"When we were small we played together often. Or rather, he came over asking to play often, might be more precise. He is four years younger."

"He was like your child." Sunako wore a moderate smile.

"That might have been how it was. I was more of a reserved child, afflicted with a terrible shyness, and there weren't any children besides Toshio that I was very close with."

"Toshio-san?"

"The director of the Ozaki Hospital. I got along well with Toshio myself but Toshio was very competitive. He wasn't the type to know his place with the older children, he was vigorous, so Toshio and I ended up stuck playing alone together. Toshio didn't get along well with the older kids but he got along well with younger ones. He could say some very outrageous things, and when he was in the mood he could be very cruel and hard hearted but you could say they looked up to that."

"A stereotypical child bully, wasn't he?" Sunako smiled. "But, somehow I simply can't picture Muroi-san playing together with a child bully. Somehow, I have the impression that as a child you did nothing but read books by yourself."

"It wasn't like that. I got up to a lot of mischief," Seishin smiled. "Though usually the one who brought it up was Toshio. He'd plan some terrible prank, or plan some incredibly reckless way to play. He liked to defy taboos. I tried to be an outside force of resistance but Toshio would absolutely never listen to what I said. So I'd end up stuck going along with him. I probably thought it was my job to be the break to make sure Toshio wasn't too reckless."

"...Somehow, that does seem like you."

Seishin turned his eyes towards the light of the lamp.

"In the village we have a festival called the mushiokuri. I've followed after that.... .."

Seishin somehow remembered the night of this year's mushiokuri. He had the feeling it was long ago, and yet that it had just happened.

"The truth is, you musn't do that kind of thing. It was a religious ritual, so to the villagers there are proper religious reasons why you shouldn't. It's in the middle of the night for one thing, so children following along after it is unheard of. But each year, there would always be children who would follow along after."

That's what kind of creatures children are."

"That may be."

"I wonder how old we were? Toshio was the one who said we should try following them. I, of course, was against it. Mikiyasu was---any time it might have been dangerous, he would be caught between Toshio and me, all shook up. ... Mikiyasu was easily scared. He was a very scared, timid child. So, for him following after the procession was probably terrifying to him. If we were found by the adults we'd be yelled at. That wasn't all, it's a festival with a kind of scary atmosphere too. I opposed it, and with a relieved face he agreed with me; but, Toshio said 'if that's the case, fine' and said he'd go by himself, and he wanted to go with him so much he couldn't stand it."

"I think I understand," Sunako smiled. Seishin also smiled faintly.

"It was always like that. Mikiyasu in the end gingerly stuck with Toshio. I couldn't help it and tagged along to keep Toshio from making too much of a mess. It's always been like that... ..."

When was it that they stopped playing together? It wasn't just Seishin who, upon entering that pubescent threshold between childhood and adulthood, slipped out of the child only groups and made groups up of those the same age. Somewhere along the line they stopped playing purely stupid pranks and reckless games, and spent more time talking than doing things. Around that time Toshio too found the way to compromise with those older than him, and Seishin remembered borrowing quite a few books and records from the book store's Tashiro and the Murasako rice shop's older brother. And then Seishin didn't see much of Mikiyasu. Mikiyasu himself found other friends---and then became an adult, married, succeeded the family business, and became a father. But, certainly for a time, he and Mikiyasu had joint ownership over a certain time between them.

Seishin held his tongue thinking of Mikiyasu, outside of the village, in a hospital room somewhere. He lost his wife, he lost his child, and he was going to lose himself---

Say, Sunako's voice suddenly chimed. "If Muroi-san had somebody dear to him, and if you thought that you wanted to let them live, do you know what you

should do?"

"Become a doctor?"

"You're wrong," Sunako laughed. "You kill them."

Seishin was flabbergasted.

"To let someone live---if it means to be the master of their time of death, then it means to kill them of your own will. If you don't do it then someone else will kill that person. They will snatch them out of your hands, Muroi-san." Sunako said with a lightly voiced laugh. "Isn't it funny? It is hard having people near to you die. Even though you think it unforgivable, having them snatched out of your life, it's a terrible thing and yet if you want to avoid that, then there's nothing but to kill them yourself. That's what kind of creatures we are."

"Yes.... ... That is true."

Sunako stood from the bench and peered into the darkness of the sanctuary. "... ... Aren't 'precious' and 'piteous' rather alike?"

"Mm?"

Sunako laughed and turned to look back. "For example, suppose you were to keep a baby bird? You would want to hold it often, love it warmly, and it would be very precious to you."

Seishin vaguely nodded.

"But, however dearly you think of it, the little bird will someday die. No matter how much and how much you cherish it and take care of it, it cannot not die. If you don't want it to be taken by somebody else, if you want to have it live as you wish, so much that the only one to kill it ever could be you, then there's no difference in doing it yourself. That is why, yes? If something is precious, it isn't just precious, it's piteous. ...Don't you feel that way?"

"... ... I see."

"That's why if something dies and we think piteously on them, you would say it was precious. You don't want to lose them; losing them is pitiful,

oshii

, I think that is why we say they are dear,
itooshii

. Preciously piteous,
ito oshii."

"....Mm."

Seishin smiled thinly. It was because Sunako was so argumentative, and because it was a reasoning that could be seen as charming from a certain broken vantage point, and also because it was funny that he was being convinced by a little girl of such a young age.

"Is this the kind of thing you always think about?"

At Seishin's question, Sunako looked to Seishin fleetingly, then as if averting her gaze looked up at the stained glass windows.

"I guess so. Living and dying---I often think of these things. I can't not think of them."

Her somewhat pensive tone of voice pricked at Seishin's chest. Sunako bore a grave burden on her health. You could even say that she was always in the ravine between life and death. Flustered with himself for such a foolish question, he suddenly remembered. SLE left one compromised. There were problems with one's immune system. Thus it was easy to catch an infectious disease, her body's ability to resist lacking due to having so many problems all over her body. And now in the village a dangerous plague was spreading out.

"Uhm...." Seishin again tonight was uncertain what to call Sunako, his words muddled. "I think it might be better not to come here too much, don't you?"

Sunako turned to face him. "As I thought, I'm a bother?"

"That isn't what I mean. It's just... there are wild dogs and such."

"Or talk of them. But, I have yet to catch sight of one."

"It's dangerous at night, even out in the country like this."

Sunako stared fixedly at Seishin, then gave a begrudging nod mixed with a sigh. "I understand. I will behave myself in the house. I will be sure not to

invade Muroi-san's territory."

"That isn't what I mean, really."

"You may say it to me frankly. I am used to not having things go my way."

"It isn't that," Seishin hesitated to say. "I'd like you to keep this a secret, but."

Sunako tilted her head.

"It will be fine to tell your parents. I think it is necessary to let your mother know especially. Your family's doctor as well. But, I don't want the people of the village to know. I'd like you not to let it leak outside of your house."

"Could it be that it is such an important secret?"

"That's right. For now, still."

"All right, I will promise."

And so Seishin explained to the girl who nodded with a serious expression.

"In the village right now, an unidentified disease is spreading."

Sunako blinked. "... ... An epidemic?"

"That's the question troubling us. Toshio is thinking that the wild dogs and small animals---and the ticks and fleas attached to them may be the intermediate carriers."

"And that is dangerous?"

"It's dangerous. At least, all of the patients that we have seen to this point have had the worst possible progression and outcome. ---It's ironic, isn't it? You all had come here seeking safer living conditions."

"That's so. I wonder if it isn't more dangerous than being in town. But, these things happen. And, what kind of sickness it is?"

Seishin shook his head. "I don't very well know yet. Toshio is saying that it doesn't conform to any existing epidemic."

"A new strain?"

"I don't know. There's the possibility that it's a new strain or a variation, he's saying, but. Since it becomes dramatically worse, there's no time to analyze it in

detail. Unlike people from the city, the people of the village are against pathological autopsies. We also don't have a fully equipped hospital. That's why as far as specifics go, we are completely in the mists."

"I see... .."

"So, it'd be better not to go out walking carelessly. Particularly with the possibility that the carrier animals are loitering in this area."

"I understand," Sunako tilted her head lightly to the side looking doubtful. "And I'd finally met Muroi-san, really it is too bad. I wonder if once in a while it would still be all right?"

"I don't know... .. To tell the truth, since we don't know what it is, we don't know how to defend against it. You might not be safe just because you're holed up in the house. I can't say any single thing for certain, though."

"It's like a roulette, isn't it? If my luck is poor, I shall be caught. But, that it would be better to lower my chances of a dangerous encounter is a truth, isn't it."

"That's what I think."

"Thank you. I will tell this to my mother and Ebuchi-san. But, I will say, not to talk about it outside of the house. If a panic breaks out, it will be troublesome. That is how it is, yes?"

Seishin nodded.

"I will take care to be careful, and it will only be once in a while. So, may I come again sometime?"

"It isn't something you need to seek my permission for. But, you really should take care."

Cultural and Translation Notes

3 - 1

49th day anniversaries

- According to Buddhist faith, after the dead die they meet with 7 different judges, one every 7 days, who determine their next life cycle as they try to reach Nirvana. On the final 49th day, it is said that their next fate is determined, making it particularly important, spiritually. On each 7th day, but particularly the 7th and 49th, family members pray and hope for the deceased to receive the "best" possible judgments.

The September

Equinoctial Week

is also mentioned as coming up, so I'll refer you back to the notes in

[Chapter 1.3-1](#)

Higan or other shore was said in Buddhist lore to be set in the far west. At the Vernal (spring) and Autumn Equinox, the sun sets due west, and at these times they were said to be able to cross over from the other shore, and festivities or rituals are held throughout the week, honoring the dead's burial plots and family Buddhist family altars, leaving food and drink offerings to the dead and reading Buddhist sutras at grave sites. As these celebrations are a week long each time, they have those equinoxes at the center of the assigned weeks; March 21st and September 23rd.

3 - 5

Kawaii/Kawaisou, Oshii/Itooshii

When Sunako talks about precious and piteous, the words she uses in Japanese are

kawaii

可愛い for cute and

kawaisou

可哀想 for pitiable, often used or said when saying "the poor thing" or expressing sympathy. The word

kawaii

is made up of the kanji for acceptable and love; the word

kawaisou

is made up of the same acceptable, pity, and thought. This translated imperfectly but passably in English.

She also supposes the word

itooshi

愛おい used to refer to someone beloved, usually in a romantic sense, may be made up of the word 'love' 愛 (read as either (

w)ai

in

kawaii or *ito* in *itooshii*

) from cute/precious and

oshii

惜しい, for pity, lack or regret. There was no way I could think of to translate this without noting the Japanese roots.

Chapter 4

Part 1

It was the morning of September 10th, when the morning examinations had begun and he was just thinking of taking a break that Toshio received the call from the National Hospital in the town of Mizobe.

"Doctor, the phone. It is from the National Hospital's Dr. Taniguchi."

Ritsuko turned the phone over to Toshio who excused himself from his patient to return to the waiting room. There, he took the call.

Taniguchi from the national hospital was an older physician than Toshio. His upperclassman by seven years from the same university, of course they knew each other from the university itself but being the connection between a senior and a junior afforded him certain accommodations. That said, Taniguchi himself wasn't born in Mizobe, nor did he live in the vicinity of Mizobe. Taniguchi came to the national hospital twice a week as a side job to lecturing at the university. He came from the city on an express train for two days a week, then went back.

The national hospital was a hospital large enough to rival the mutual aid hospital of the JA but the truth was that size was all there was to it. The doctors employed there full time were young with no career. They came rushing in from their bases to make a career there in order to then return to their home towns and serve as private physicians. Those who didn't were old fogeys who lost their place to call home to go back to. There were doctors with experience who, while having established suitable social standing in the city, would come in so many times a week for consultation.

"I've switched lines." Toshio took the receiver.

"Ah, Toshio-kun. This is about the patient you had turned over to us the other day, yes?"

Because of the relations between juniors and their upperclassmen, Toshio

often relied on Taniguchi in order to turn over obstreperous treatment cases--- that is, patients who would require hospitalization for any long period--to the national hospital. If they required surgery, they went there, if they required brain surgery, they'd be there, there were plenty of routes. Toshio himself didn't turn much of a profit from this but in exchange he received information. There was also the benefit of being able to ask about their progression easily.

"Do you mean Yasumori Mikiyasu?"

"Mm, yes. About him, this morning he died of renal failure at 5:16 AM."

Is that so, Toshio murmured. When overseeing him as he was taken away by ambulance, Toshio had resolved within himself that that may have been the last time he saw his childhood friend.

"What was the progression like?"

"When he was carried in, he had quite severe anemia, as you know. I wasn't present so I don't know, but. His creatinine levels were high so we were vigilant regarding renal failure but MODS developed into DIC, resulting in MOF. Do you need detailed progression notes?"

"It may put you through great pains, but by all means, please. Quickly, if you could."

"A thorough student aren't you, as always."

Toshio smiled bitterly. "Mikiyasu is a childhood friend. ---It is a small village."

Ah, said Taniguchi, his voice awkward. "That's, I'm very sorry to hear that. It was a bit of a strange progression, wasn't it? At least from looking at his medical records, I wouldn't think he'd had such severe renal impairment, but. If only I could have seen him when he first came in, but it wasn't my consultation day."

"It is a shame. ---Was it aplastic anemia, or was there a white blood cell disorder?"

"There wasn't, actually."

"None? You are sure?"

"Mm. You said as much. For the record, we ran thorough tests here ourselves, though. It seems it was not aplastic anemia. There was nothing unusual with his

bone marrow. He had high neutrophil counts but his white blood cell count and hematopoietic figures weren't abnormal."

"Is that so," Toshio answered while thinking 'I knew it.'

"Will a fax do?"

"It will do nicely."

Toshio conveyed his gratitude to Taniguchi and hung up the phone.

(Toshio-san)

Mikiyasu's voice lingering in his ears sounded naive---he guiltily strove to forget that voice that had been relying on him. There was no use in holding it in his heart forever. This wasn't so special of a tragedy, not compared to what it meant for the village as a whole.

Before notice of Mikiyasu's death came in, he had just received notification from Ishida that a man in Shimo-Sotoba had died. yesterday Seishin had reported that an old woman in Naka-Sotoba died. The day before yesterday Ishida, again, conveyed that an office worker living in Mizuguchi died. At this rate, the situation was quickly becoming more urgent.

(It's contagious.)

There was no proof but he was already certain. The first infected person became the contagion and a secondary infection occurred. Those patients who were the victims of the secondary infection were many. And from those secondary infection patients as a source of contamination came third wave infections. ---This indicated how the situation, the infection was expanding.

(The time span is short...)

Regardless of the fact that it appeared the incubation period was a week to two weeks, the time span in which the infection was expanding was far too short for that. As expected, maybe it wasn't something that spread from person to person. With fleas and ticks as the carriers, it could have broken out in a day or two. But, living in the mountains, it would be difficult to find less air tight houses than most of those in the village. How on earth were they to exterminate the carrier animals?

Toshio felt something akin to a faint chill. Just maybe, this could have been a calamity beyond what Toshio had first imagined as a "worst case scenario."

"Mikiyasu-san died, you say?" At Ritsuko's words, Yasuyo's eyes widened.

"Yes. Just now there was a call from the National Hospital."

Really, said Yasuyo, her hands washing her teacup coming to a stop as she gazed into the kitchen sink.

The kitchen was a remnant of the times when they took in-patients. They used to prepare meals here for in-patients, and in the dinning room near by staff could also eat. That dinning room was now the break room. In one enclosure was a break room, a washroom for kitchen staff that they no longer had, but its sofa had become a space for napping.

From that point on the kitchen may have gone unused but even now it was maintained as if it were used, and Ritsuko at times used it to heat up lunch or even to do light cooking. There was a separate kitchenette for preparing tea but when taking breaks it was more convenient to use the kitchen. And the kitchenette was narrow, so when it came time to clean up afterwards it was more common for everyone to make use of the kitchen at once.

Yasuyo was caught in her thoughts, her hands stopping, but her face suddenly lifted as if her breath were cut short, wiping at her hands.

"Ricchan, sorry, but I'll leave this to you. I'm going to talk to the doctor."

"Yasuyo-san."

"It'll just be a bit, as expected we can't not ask the doctor about the status of thing. It looks like the part timers are uneasy about it too, and all."

Her intent stated, Yasuyo stepped out of the kitchen. It wasn't long after that she returned.

"Ricchan, do you have plans this afternoon?"

"No."

"Then, when work is finished, could you stay behind, I wonder? We're holding a little meeting. For lunch it sounds like the doctor will prepare lunches for it."

Yes ma'am, Ritsuko answered while thinking 'at last.' Toshio would have an explanation. She had a feeling she wanted to hear it and didn't want to hear it. If she heard it, it would be confirmed, she felt. Ritsuko and the others imagining something and Toshio as a doctor declaring it were different matters entirely.

Nervously finishing the cleaning, she returned to work. Each other staff member she saw seemed to have the same nervousness but nobody said a word. Caught up in the strange flowing feel of tension, even as noon came the flow of patients didn't stop. Lately, it had become customary for their lunch hour to be pushed back. There were many patients. It didn't seem like there were many who seemed especially sick. They had the impression that patients were coming in with symptoms that they wouldn't usually come into the hospital over. Those patients in particular would talk with Toshio for a long time, dragging out medical examination hours.

(We're in suspense...)

That's what Ritsuko thought. The patients--the villagers were, whether conscious of the increasing number of deaths or not, vaguely awayer that something was strange, that their health and very lives could suffer unusually easily. That was likely a disease spreading throughout the villagers. And that was surely from now on going to compound beyond the level it was at even now.

Taking lunch in shifts, Ritsuko handled the patients. The last patient's examination ended past two o'clock. Finishing up cleaning afterwards, she went towards the break room, where all staff members were already assembled.

"Ricchan's the last?" Toshio smiled before a stack of documents piled on the table. "Close the door and have a seat."

His tone was the same as always. Taking some relief in that, Ritsuko closed the door and sat in the empty seat. In the break room was the cool air of the air conditioner, and in that air the more chilling draft of their nervousness.

"You might already know this but today the contractor's Mikiyasu died," Toshio began his talk, looking towards Mutou and Towada. "This might be a hard conversation for Mutou-san and you to follow but if there's anything unclear, just ask. And be patient."

Mutou and Towada nodded.

"With Mikiyasu dead, that makes the death toll since August nineteen people."

That hit like a bomb. Ritsuko's back muscled tensed. The voices saying 'that many' were multiple, and Ritsuko may have unconsciously gave voice to such herself.

"There have been that many, actually. Amongst them are ones who didn't have anything to do with us, who collapsed in Mizobe and were taken to the hospital there, or who were taken off to there. Anyways, the government office has been sending in death certificates, and counting them up, Mikiyasu is the nineteenth. --It's an abnormal situation."

Ritsuko lightly swallowed her breath.

"And Mikiyasu was, following Nao-san and Susumu-kun, the third death at the contractors. It's possible everyone here's been faintly aware of it but there's the possibility that it's an epidemic."

"Doctor, are you sure?" Mutou leaned forward.

"I'm sure people are dead. And it's clear there're excessive deaths, and an increasing trend at that. I think that we can be pretty certain in thinking that it's an epidemic."

Saying that, Toshio roughly explained how things had progressed. Concretely, he gave the names of the dead and their causes of death.

"By the way, the result of the blood tests on the contractor's Nao-san and Mikiyasu were both negative for any epidemics. Based on the test results, the two of them were indeed not infected with any known epidemic. I requested a culture test too but I don't have all of those results yet. Culture tests take time. I think that it'll be a little longer until the cultures come back but if nothing else based on what we know at this time, the two of them weren't carrying any germs that would cause them to suddenly lose their lives. Murasako Mieko-san was the same. The results that came back from the police were completely clean."

Uhm, Towada spoke up. "Even though the results haven't come in, can you

declare that it isn't an epidemic? I thought that the doctor had just said that it was an epidemic, but."

"Mm, it comes down to this. ---The cause of an epidemic is a pathogenic microbe. When those microbes ravage a body, it's called an infection. All of them are indeed

contagious

, epi for spread demic for among the people, but among those infections, the one that inflict grave damages to the human body, the ones that have such an effect that society can't afford to disregard them are called epidemics. Amongst all types of infections are ones we're especially vigilant against called epidemics. ---Are you following this so far?"

"Ah.... yes."

"So an epidemic is strictly those infections that have been labeled "epidemics." Right now, the thing that's spreading through the village doesn't correspond to any of those predefined epidemics. Based on the symptoms as well as the test results, it's cleared from being any of them. So it's not an epidemic but based on the observations of the increasing numbers of patients, it's clearly contagious. And the results are grave, and the number of patients is high. It's not an existing epidemic but it's clearly an infection disastrous to society. As far as its ability to influence people and society, I think it'd be appropriate to call it an epidemic."

"Ah, I understand."

Toshio nodded,

"It's not an existing epidemic, and the possibility, however small, that it's not an infection, still remains. It's possible to think that it's some kind of poison or an allergic reaction to something. Anyway, it'd be accurate to say we still don't know what's happening. We don't know the cause of the disease, or how it spreads."

Yasuyo raised her hand.

"Is there the possibility that it's a new type of epidemic?"

"The possibility that it's a new kind, of course, exists."

"What will we do about this from now on?" Mutou said, sounding lost.

"If only we know, huh? At any rate, until we know the cause of the chain of deaths, our hands and feet are tied. Not only can't we treat or prevent it, we can't ask the administration for assistance."

"There's no way to have the administration investigate it?"

"I plan to do that. That said, I have to put together the data and the related materials. I've got to do that and make sure to have the administration see the need to investigate it. All of this, the Health Department's Ishida-san is currently investigating." Toshio said, with a bitter smile. "If it's an existing epidemic or a rogue strain, it'll be fast work. We haven't gotten any results of that nature yet, so we have to get together the materials with more explanatory power. Regardless of everything, we don't have any solid proof that it's contagious. It'd be best to think of this as something that's going to take time."

"The administration is slow to do anything at times like this, aren't they? If you don't pester them with quite a bit of proof, then...." Mutou breathed a deep sigh. Everyone present sighed as well with agreement.

"What we know right now is that it seems to start with anemia. At least, Shimizu Megumi-chan, the Yasumori's Nao-san, and Mikiyasu, that's three people, didn't have anything you could point to as wrong with them besides anemia. Anemia occurs, so their complexion is poor, they feel washed out and have no appetite. The people around them think the summer heat is getting to them, or that it's a cold, and it's easy to overlook."

"What is the cause of the anemia?" Kiyomi asked, causing Toshio to shake his head.

"That I don't know. Looking at the test results, it's normocytic normochromic anemia. At least we know it isn't iron deficiency anemia or pernicious anemia. It doesn't seem like it's a blood formation disorder. The National Hospital tested Mikiyasu but they said to me that he probably didn't have aplastic anemia or leukemia. Looking at the rest results, you would think it was anemia coming from external bleeding or hemolysis but there're no signs of internal bleeding that could be the cause of the anemia."

Shimoyama nodded. "We used a CT to search here and there for that. --- That's right, there is no internal bleeding. At least, there wasn't for Yasumori-san's wife."

Toshio nodded.

"In cases where it's a small continuous bleed, X-rays or ultrasonic rays may miss the bleeding spot but, in this case, I don't think that's it. If nothing else, since it suddenly gets so much worse and all. Thinking of the situation up until now, it all comes to an end within a few days. The progression is about that fast."

"Then, what about hemolysis?" Yasuyo asked.

"Going by the process of elimination, the only thing left is hemolysis, but. In cases of hemolysis, bilirubin and LDH levels should be higher. Yet in the initial stages, that doesn't show up. Coombs tests come up negative too, so if nothing else it's certain not to be hemolysis from an autoimmune disease."

"So there's no hemolysis that doesn't raise that---whatever it was called?" Mutou said.

"It's not that there isn't. There's intravascular hemolysis and extravascular hemolysis but in the case of intravascular hemolysis, serum bilirubin levels and LDH levels don't raise. In those cases, hemoglobin would be in the blood plasma or there would be hemoglobinuria but that wasn't the case in Nao-san or Mikiyasu. On the other hand, in the case of extravascular hemolysis, it's common for bilirubin and LDH levels to rise but it seems that isn't certain to happen."

Mutou groaned, sounding terribly confused.

"Anyway, I think that the odds of hemolysis are high. And not something congenital, it's acquired. It's not something that affects immunity, but that raises the sensitivity of the complement system, or possibly something that causes red blood cells to be crushed, or it may be some drug or poison."

"Poison, you say?" Yasuyo said, Toshio nodding.

"Spider or snake venom, or even bee venom can cause hemolysis it seems. If it's a snake or a bee, the patient or their families would probably remember

being bitten or stabbed but there's the possibility it was a spider or another insect of some sort whose poison is causing the hemolysis. --Then there's drugs. Sulfa drugs or salicytic acid, or lead or arsenic could also cause hemolysis. In that case, the soil, the water, or possibly the food could be contaminated but based on the patients' behavior, this is a very low possibility, I think."

"What about existing epidemics?"

"It's modeled like malaria but it's probably not malaria. There's no high fever characteristic of malaria. We could think of it as a rogue strain of it but I'd think that tests for malaria would pick up on a rogue strain of it, too."

"The patients who die are mostly doing so in the middle of the night, aren't they. The notifications come in first thing in the morning, don't they?" Kiyomi said. "It isn't PNH?"

"I think we could suspect that too."

PNH, Mutou mumbled, to which Yasuyo answered.

"Paroxysmal Nocturnal Hemoglobinuria, possibly. But, it's written in the books that PNH progresses slowly. Could it be a more vicious type of that, I wonder?"

Kiyomi nodded. "With PNH, pancytopenia occurs. That said, Nao-san had lowered counts of all blood cell types didn't she? Because of that, she became more prone to infection, and with a tendency to hemorrhage, a blood clot could form. Nao-san had heart failure, didn't she? A pulmonary edema came from that."

"I wonder if it was heart failure from a blood clot?"

"That is a possibility, isn't it? Also, it was written in the books that it could lead to death by renal failure too, but. Gotouda Fuki-san was renal failure, wasn't she!"

Toshio smiled wryly. "You've really done your homework. I'm in awe."

Yasuyo and Kiyomi's voices raised in a laugh. They both pointed their fingers at each other, saying they didn't feel like doing it but the other kept pushing it, blaming it on each other. Toshio laughed too,

"The contractor's Mikiyasu died of renal failure too. When I first had him

taken away to the hospital, his BUN levels were elevated. His creatinine levels were within normal ranges so at first the doctors thought that he was dehydrated due to the heat but later he had bloody urine and obvious signs of renal failure. The doctors tried to treat that but in the end renal failure lead to DIC occuring and things suddenly turned for the worst and he died."

What is DIC Towada asked Satoko. As Satoko seemed uninterested in answering, Kiyomi answered.

"Disseminated intravascular coagulation syndrome. In short, abnormalities in how the blood coagulates."

"Our nurses are efficient," Toshio laughed. "But, while the rest results show the cause of death was uremia, it wasn't just his kidneys, his lungs and liver were malfunctioning too. At first it was respiratory failure that was occurring. At the end he contracted pneumonia, and his liver functioning fell drastically. He died of uremia so on the surface it looks like just renal failure but if he died because he couldn't breathe, it would have probably said lung failure."

"Multiple organ failure---MOF, then. Or these days, they call it, what, MODS?"

Kiyomi asked, to which Yasuyo nodded.

"At any rate, it looks like the whole body just starts falling apart. The first characteristic symptom is anemia, then it worsens steadily into MOF. The problem becomes how to defer it." Yasuyo spoke, looking to Toshio. "If we don't do something within three days, it becomes unmanageable doesn't it? Without the time to investigate what's happening, there's no time to search for a treatment.This is very serious, this matter."

"What's the route of infection?" Kiyomi asked, to which Toshio shook his head.

"We don't really know. I had Seishin look into the connections between the patients but no matter how you think about it, there are patients without any direct contact."

"It's hard to think of it as a direct infection, in other words. At Shimizu-san's place, the only one to be hit was Megumi-chan, and all. At the Maruyasu Sawmill, it was just Giichi-san, wasn't it? At Maruyasu, Giichi-san was bed

ridden, with the family even tending to his bedpans, so it would seem like it would transfer directly to the family, and yet."

"That goes for us too, doesn't it?" said Yasuyo, teasingly. "We've gone out as nurses amongst them after all. Like this, we're lined up at the goose's neck for the patients, so it can't be a direct infection can it? It's likely not a droplet infection either. Though it seems like it would spread by blood. We might use gloves, but I can't imagine the family would."

"If that were the case, the Maruyasu family would obviously be hit a lot harder, wouldn't it! Since that's not the case, doesn't that mean that it doesn't spread through the blood?"

"Then, an intermediate carrier animal? Why, that really will be a hassle!"

"If it's an intermediary animal, wouldn't there be more of a concentration of where the victims are? It feels like they've come from all over the village, doesn't it? Could it be a matter of the ratio of outbreaks? Even if you're infected, the rate of outbreak could be low, don't you suppose? Whether it spreads to the family or doesn't spread to the family; could it be a matter of constitution?"

"That's true..."

"Family it spreads to and family it doesn't, huh..." Toshio said to himself. "Well, even if we talk about it here, nothing's going to happen. Anyway, we need to gather more medical cases, for now."

"That we do."

"Right now I'm suspecting carrier animals. That seems to be the highest likelihood. It's just, looking at the most recent patients, patients coming from the same concentrated families are rare. The Gotouda-san's place and the contractor's cases are the exceptions. It seems like the infection rate, or possibly the outbreak rate isn't too high, you could probably say. That said, don't get too comfortable. Anyway, be sure to wash your hands, wear gloves, and be thorough with things like that."

"And to also be careful with handling medical waste, too." Kiyomi said, to which Toshio nodded.

"I think everyone else is worried too but if we take care I think there's the chance we can protect against it. We have to protect ourselves too, and to make sure we don't become a source of contamination, I'd like everyone to take care."

At Toshio's words, everyone nodded.

"And also, don't spread this out. We don't know a single thing for sure yet, after all. There's no point in inciting a useless panic. Ishida-san and me are taking the necessary measures to keep it quiet."

To this, too, everyone nodded.

Part 2

Yasumori Junko didn't know what kind of expression she should wear. Mikiyasu's funeral was to start momentarily. Tokijirou and Setsuko stood before the altar looking as if to waste away, their faces bowed down deeply. It was heart-wrenching, the way they clung to each other's hands as if they had nobody but each other to rely upon.

Junko's husband Kazuya was weighted with the grief of the loss of a relative he got along with so well. No, it was as if he were in a daze. Junko herself was in a similar daze, and of course was also sad. But, this was the third funeral for the contractors. The first was Nao's death, then from there was Susumu and then Mikiyasu went. When Nao died, Junko's whose voice rang out as she cried, was, on the third occasion that was today, more bewildered beyond her means than she was strictly sad.

Her father-in-law Kazunari was the same. From the antechamber he gazed at Tokujirou and Setsuko, his head tilting with a cool and distant expression.

"What's happening, these days."

I know, sighed her mother-in-law Atsuko.

"Three of them all in a row. I no longer know what to even say."

"You said it. But, don'tcha think there's something strange about this?"

Something, Atsuko blinked. Kazunari's face was all the more cold. "Don't you

think it's too many in a row? Not just at my uncle's place. My old man, Yamairi, too. You don't think there could be some kind of bad disease going around, or something, huh?"

Junko's back stiffened as if worried about what others around would think at hearing Kazunari's low voice. Stop that, said Atsuko in an even lower voice. "Don't voice such terrible things like that!"

"But you know, before the Junior Monk came, asking a lot of questions about my old man. If he had get well visitors or not. That was probably what the Junior Monk had on his mind too, don't you think?"

"Please, stop it, I said. Please don't forget that we're at a funeral."

"I ain't forgot. Isn't that why I'm saying it? Adding in my old man's this is our fourth one. With this, that's four new graves built in the cemetery."

"Father-in-law didn't have some strange disease. If it was a disease that could spread to others, we who were taking care of him would have caught it long ago." Right, said Atsuko looking to her for agreement, though Junko only nodded, still dazed.

"The old man's case is different from the three of them."

"It was different. He had been ill for a long time after all. But, to others, they might not understand how different it was. If they start talking about some strange epidemic, they'll make it all Father-in-law's fault. That's why you shouldn't carelessly talk about such things."

But, groaned Kazunaru, trying to continue.

Junko compared him with Tokujirou on the other end of the altar. Yes, Giichi's condition was already poor, and it wasn't a disease which could spread to others. But, was there any way to explain the succession of misfortunes that they were experiencing?

Mysteriously, Junko remembered the night when Bon began, with the now deceased Nao at the lumberyard. Specifically, she remembered the feeling when they had met Kirishiki Seishirou. She didn't know why. The feeling she had done something she couldn't take back that chilled her spine. She had that same feeling. ---Yes, that something that couldn't be taken back was starting,

that feeling.

At lunch time Kaori casually looked to the calendar and realized again that today was September 11th. September 11th, Sunday. The character for 11. Two ones. It was on August 11th that Megumi was missing. Since then, one month had passed.

She felt like something was tightening in her chest. Over summer break, it had been an incessant feeling. As they entered into September and a new school term started, she had finally been starting to forget that and yet at the slightest opportunity like this it was resurrected.

Feeling like something was lodged in her throat, Kaori swallowed what was in her mouth and set her chopsticks down. Her food wasn't going past her throat. ---Or rather, when she remembered Megumi, everything from eating to going to school to helping in the kitchen, such every day things all made her cowed. It was like, for example, being at a morning assembly at school and laughing when you weren't supposed to. It felt like she was doing something terribly imprudent. She felt a touch guilty.

Seeing that Kaori had put down her chopsticks, her mother Sachiko made a stern face. "Kaori, now, eat all of your lunch!"

When pressed she nodded but she felt like small bones were caught in her throat. It was always like this. Even if she was casually watching TV, she wondered if it was all right for her to be doing this. Even going to her club or taking classes, she couldn't run away from the thought that she was doing this even though Megumi was dead. Enjoying TV or a book or talking with her friends, raising her voice in laughter, realizing that she was enjoying herself, that she was forgetting that Megumi was dead, the absurd feeling that she was an unjust human being sprung up from nowhere.

Akira, who was scarfing down his lunch, gave Kaori a fleeting glance and said "cheer up."

"Mm...."

Sachiko, too, gave a light sigh. "It's just as Akira says. I understand that it was a shock but get over it and cheer up already."

That's right, Kaori murmured. But she couldn't forget. On the 11th, Megumi was missing. On the night of the 12th she was found. On the 13th, she paid a get well visit. That was the last time she saw Megumi. On the 14th, Kaori didn't know anything. She didn't even dream that Megumi was bad enough to die, and another trite summer day passed her by. Then was the 15th. Suddenly that phone call came.

"Even Megumi-chan would be sad if she saw you looking like that. You have to work hard for Megumi-chan's share, too."

Kaori cast her eyes downward. How many times had Sachiko said that to her now. Kaori's sadness was Megumi's sadness. In that case she couldn't relax and rest in peace to move on. Megumi's death was such a shame that from now on Kaori would have to live for Megumi as well. She said that the various joys Megumi couldn't have, Kaori would have to obtain in her place.

Is that right, she thought. Is that really what Megumi wanted or not? It sounded like an incredibly self serving excuse. There was no doubt that if it were Megumi she'd rather be happy herself than see Kaori happy. Even though she was dead, if she didn't even have a friend mourning her, that would be how many times more miserable for her? Sachiko's words sounded more like being told to clear away her mess. It was like being told not to hold on to her affection for the dead, to clean that up and throw it away. Kaori thought that that would be like betraying Megumi. The more Sachiko said that the more she thought that at least she wouldn't forget about Megumi, that she wouldn't 'clear it away', so she had to think to herself.

Lightly gripping her hand and raising her face, across the table her father was looking worriedly at her. Kaori smiled a bit and took up her chopsticks. It wasn't that she had no appetite but she was still resistant to continuing to eat. She had a feeling it was a part of 'clearing it away'.

"Speaking of that," Akira murmured to no one in particular. "Yesterday, somewhere in Shimo-Sotoba, it looks like someone died again. Mourning lanterns were out."

Sachiko's brows furrowed. "Oh dear, no. ...

Again?"

Akira gave a strangely serious nod. His father looked at that expression of Akira's, and then as if tasting something bitter, turned his eyes away.

"Something strange's going on, huh? There's Megumi, then after that the lumber mill's Yasuyuki-nii-chan. Before that too, there were the three dead in Yamairi, weren't there? Why're this many people all dying?"

"This kind of thing happens," Sachiko said, her tone blunt. "Death is something that comes in succession. Even so, I wish it'd give it a rest already. If it goes on like this, it's like a bad omen."

"That's the problem, huh? It's like, I got this feeling something bad's happening."

"Don't say such stupid things," Sachiko said with an overdone grimace. "The people in Yamairi were getting on in years. Yasuyuki-san and Megumi-chan died of illness didn't they? It isn't as if they were killed or something."

Turning his eyes to Akira as he said "Yeah, but," Tanaka swallowed what was in his mouth. He knew that it was Nakano Wataru. Nakano who lived in Shimo-Sotoba died. Yesterday, his death certificate came in and Tanaka turned over a copy of it to Ishida. Since this summer, the number of copies he had handed over like so came to nineteen. And now the pace was getting faster. It didn't take an expert to see that the situation was accelerating.

Even at the government office there were voices saying something was strange. The Ozaki Clinic's Toshio and Ishida were in contact frequently, do you think it's because of that? they whispered. Nobody would say it too loudly, fearing the gaze of the bureau chief. The head of the branch office wasn't from Sotoba. Appointed by the town hall, he transferred to the village. Ishida seemed to ignore the chief and worked with Toshio, something all members of the staff realized, while keeping their mouths shut. Sotoba had a system that kept things moving smoothly. The chief, who was an outsider to the village, had no place in the three pillar system of the village. Complete outsider though he was, the bureau chief had to save face as the bureau chief. Everybody knew full well that if they passed things through the chief, it would actually mean that things would no longer be able to progress smoothly.

And so things carried on its same manner as when it was a village. While it

had been annexed into Mizobe, the village was still its own distinct entity, and had a tendency to refuse interference from the town. The town accepted that, and had a trend of laissez-faire. No matter what happened, it wouldn't be run by the bureau chief, and consequently it wouldn't be run by the town itself, and the chief was to be left out of affairs; treated as an outsider; such was the unspoken agreement within the government office. Doing it this way, it went through Kanemasa who put it through to the town, which was how it would come around to the bureau chief. Only after that did the bureau chief's involvement even begin.

That said, nineteen death certificates was too much for Tanaka's heart to bear alone. Especially when things were like this, when he was seeing his own wife make light of the situation, the sense of an impending crisis swelled. Akira was the one who was correct. Sotoba was strange. He felt an impatient irritation with himself for not being able to say it.

Taking a deep breath and raising his face, his gaze met with Kaori's. As if ashamed, Kaori cast her head down. She might have thought that he, Tanaka, was condemning her for being depressed. However clearly reluctant and unwilling it seemed, she began using her chopsticks.

He didn't think there was any need to force herself. It was sad for Kaori to have lost her friend. The feelings of sadness were something that naturally boiled up inside of her, so it wasn't as if she could just repress it through sheer will power, could she? If those around her told her not to grieve, Kaori would just be hiding it. He had the feeling that ordering her to cheer up like Sachiko was harmful, without benefit. But it was better that she ate. There was nothing more important than keeping up her physical strength. ----Tanaka thought as much, without daring to add it to the conversation.

Motoko left the house as always, and in the distance saw a funeral procession. The coffin rose on top of the palanquin, a great crowd carrying it towards Sue no Yama.

For some reason or other she gripped her thumb in her fist. Both of Motoko's parents were already dead, so there was no need to do that and yet whenever she saw a funeral procession or a hearse, she couldn't help doing it. Now that thumb may have been a symbol for her children, for her husband and her in-

laws---for that kind of family.

Going to the highway, bearing the usual feeling of unease she headed towards Chigusa. Entering the store, she could see several people in mourning clothes. Mourners who weren't attending the burial services must have drifted here. Motoko felt a faint tightness in her chest. She was certain that when they entered the shop, they didn't spread salt or any such, did they? She couldn't help the feeling that they'd picked up something at the funeral that they had brought with them into the shop.

As if to cheer up Motoko from such a state, Kanami smiled and waved lightly from the counter. Motoko nodded and went behind the counter, preparing to do her job and then blinking in surprise. In the corner of their work space, positioned where the customer's prying eyes couldn't see, there was a paper napkin spread out and piled with salt. Kanami does this kind of thing too, Motoko thought.

As Motoko looked to her wide eyed, Kanami noted the line of sight of the customers and gave an embarrassed seeming shrug.

"It's something at least. It's a matter of comfort."

"Isn't it?" Motoko smiled.

"I get the feeling they're coming in succession. I've gotten a little superstitious over it."

Come to think of it, she had heard that someone that Kanami's mom got along well with had died. There was the misfortune in Yamairi, and a regular customer's daughter had died. Her husband was the father's coworker, so they had gone to give condolences. Even given it was a summer hotter than average, that it was continuing on this long could certainly endear a person to a superstition or two.

".....I'm sure it's over now," Motoko said in a small voice. "The summer heat seemed like there was no end to it in sight but it has gotten cooler in the mornings and the evenings."

That's right, Kanami smiled.

"A funeral? Nakano's son? ---Well, my."

The elderly gathered around Takemura's store front just as they had for years on end. Hearing Ohtsuka Yaeko's announcement, Hirosawa Takeko let out a hysteric shriek.

"Even though it was the old man who was a drunkard falling down so many times..."

"That's just it! When I heard there was a funeral for Nakano, I thought the old man had finally drank himself under too, you know!"

Takeko nodded. "His liver was failing, and it even seemed like he had one leg in the coffin already, didn't it. And yet instead he's living a long life being a bother to everyone around him!"

No doubt about that, laughed the elderly whom Tatsu watched coldly. Honestly, what happy go lucky lot. Is this what this bunch thought of all these funerals were happening in a row here? As Tatsu grumbled in her mind, a black hired car drove before her eyes. Because it was such a fine car, she dared say it couldn't be Nakano's. Just before, a fine foreign car had passed by on the road towards the temple, she had heard. It was said that the contractor's funerals were at the temple. It likely belonged to a condolence caller attending that.

As she thought that, walking out in the still summer like rays of the sun, Ikumi Itou appeared. Ikumi watched the passing hired car and gave a pretentious grimace.

"Another funeral, I wonder?"

"They say it's Nakano's funeral."

"Nakano?"

Ohtsuka Yaeko nodded. "Right. The house on the outskirts of Shimo-Sotoba. The son there died. Even though he was in the prime of life."

Ikumi snorted a thin laugh. "This summer's been nothing but funerals. That's why I said nothing good would come of it."

"Oh you, don't you say that every year?" Satou Oitarou flashed his tobacco stained yellowing teeth in a smile. However stained it indeed was, his front tooth was his own. Oitarou bragged about that.

"That's a lie, that is. It isn't like I say it every year! This year is special. Why, all these funerals!"

"It can't be helped. It's nothing but old folks here," Takeko said, Yaeko laughing, too. Ikumi gave them a glare with chilling eyes.

"How nice you can laugh. Takeko-san's household just had a funeral, didn't they?"

"That wasn't us. That was the Sawmill. The Ohtsuka sawmill is indeed related to me, so I did go, though. Even though they are relatives, I've cut ties." Yaeko waved her hand. Takeko and Oitarou nodded seemingly knowledgeable.

"They got up into some weird new religion, then had the nerve to come to us trying to convert us, putting us at our wits' end! When it came to the temple, they said they had nothing left to gain from them, so when their own grandson died, they weren't taken care of."

Oitarou nodded solemnly. "It's a punishment for the lack of respect shown to the temple. That's what I think of it, myself."

You've said it, Yaeko laughed.

Ikumi snorted. "Faith has to be faith in a proper God or it doesn't mean anything after all. Though, I worship at the temple and don't think I've profited for it. Well, even while the Sawmill's good for nothing, I'm sure they were tricked into it."

Yes, yes, Takeko said, interrupting Ikumi. If she let her go on like this, it was obvious she would have said something suspicious. "Well, it is true there are a lot of funerals. If it continues like this, I'm afraid next it might be my turn!"

"If it's you, you'll be fine. You're getting on fine somehow or another, aren't you?"

"I am, but still," said Takeko with a laugh, though Ikumi's gaze was fixed in place.

"It's been since Kanemasa moved in."

Tatsu opened her eyes.

"What is she even trying to say, this person, here. Kanemasa moved in after

the misfortune in Yamairi!"

"But, since the house had been built. That place isn't good! She shouldn't have built there. And it doesn't have anything to do with Yamairi. That was a problem with the Murasako family, I told you. Gigorou-san simply got caught up in the Murasako's bad fortune. The funerals that have been continuing since after that, aren't they from after when Kanemasa moved in? A high school student in Shimo-Sotoba, died."

"Ah, Shimizu's Tokurou-san's place's grand daughter."

"Since then haven't they been on a roll? These funerals, and for some reason we're seeing ambulances coming and going! It's Kanemasa! Kanemasa. There's definitely something to them. That bunch summons in evil."

Tatsu sighed and shook her head. She'd gotten herself started again, she feared.

But it was a fact that there were many funerals. More than Ikumi thought, more than all of the old people gathered here thought; Tatsu had such a feeling.

(Something's happening.....?)

It might be, said a feeling stagnating in her chest. Something was off about this summer. ---No, lately, Sotoba was strange. She had the intuition that at least that much was certain.

Natsuno called out simply that he was going to Mutou's and left. There was a math problem he just couldn't solve. Mutou's older brother---and his younger sister Aoi for that matter---weren't terribly reliable as teachers but Tamotsu was a collector of crib notes. It was possible he kept some from when he was a first year, he realized. Their high schools were separate but fortunately the text book they used was the same.

The summer heat was still fierce. Fed up with it he looked up to the blue sky when the not-too-far off sound of bells were heard. Looking off the side of the road, a coffin draped in a white cloth was being carried out of a house by the roadside.

Again, thought Natsuno as he stopped. He didn't know which house that one was. It's pretty close, was all Natsuno had known. Yamairi, Megumi, and after

that his parents had been involved in about two more Mourning Group tasks. Didn't that make for the fifth one? And in about one month.

Was it like this last year too, he thought. Natsuno moved in to Sotoba last year, though he didn't remember seeing any funerals then. Even though he'd seen zero since this summer, suddenly since August started, he'd seen a procession of funerals. If it was the fifth one in one month, that'd average out to more than one house per week having one. No matter how you thought about it, this was too many, but.

Cocking his head in puzzlement, he went to Mutou's. Going up to Tamotsu's room, he informed him there was a funeral, but it didn't seem to catch Tamotsu's attentions.

"Man, there's been a lot of funerals, huh?" Natsuno said, to which Tamotsu answered with a nonchalant "Have there?" while searching inside a cardboard box.

"Ain't that how it goes? Someone died, someone's about to die, you're always hearing something like that. ---Ah, found it. I've got some pretty good treasures myself, don't I? Be grateful."

As Tamotsu presented him with his crib notes, Natsuno gave him a sigh. "I'd be more grateful if instead of giving it to me like this you'd explain it to me, though."

"Depending on others's no good," Tamotsu laughed. "If you're planning on going to college, you'd be better off going to cram school."

"Like a college entrance cram school out in the country like this's be worth it. I'd be better off with correspondence courses."

"You're so un-cute." Tamotsu made an intentionally sulky face and crossed his arms. "That thing where you're all 'country, country' and making fun of us ain't cute either but the part where you'd seriously study through a correspondence course is the most not cute part about you."

"I have a consistent personality like that."

Well said, Tamotsu laughed. Natsuho laughed too and opened the note.

He didn't by any means like studying. To Natsuno this was the price he had to pay to get out of Sotoba. Whatever he had to do however, he wanted out of the village. If it was necessary, he'd do it. The thoughts of wanting out were urgent and so he continued was all it was.

(Even so, two more years...)

There was still that much more to go. Comforting himself with 'just two more years' was getting harder recently. Since Megumi had died. Imprisoned in Sotoba, Megumi was unable to escape---that was the needle prodding sharply into his back pressing Natsuno to hurry. If I don't hurry, something was going to wrap itself around him like a spider's web and he wouldn't be able to untangle it. It might not be too bad to live here, he could get to thinking, losing all direction until he thought there wasn't really a need to leave the village, was there?

---Then why can't that happen, a voice inside of him head. Adapt to the village, get comfortable; if you stop wanting to leave the village, wouldn't that be a comfortable situation in its own right? Yet Natsuno couldn't but abhor such a situation. It made him imagine an empty shell. As peaceful as it would be, all that would be left was a groundless version of himself. He feared it likely.

Shaking his head once, he tackled the problem. Incidentally helping himself to the Mutous' dinner, he finished the day's assignment after ten o'clock. Saying his thanks to Tamotsu's parents, he left the Mutous. Out of cigarettes, Tohru went with him.

"The night wind feels really refreshing, don't it?"

TOhru looked up at the western mountain. The sounds of the insects were vigorous. Even so, the wind that blew down from the dark bare surface of the mountain as if it were invited was thought of as chilly.

"Wonder if it's gonna be fall soon at this rate."

"Who knows? It's not Higan week again yet, after all. But, summer was hot, so this year winter might come early."

"What, is there a rule like that?"

"Nah. Just a guess."

That part of you, Natsuno said giving Tohru a poke. Tohru gave a light hearted laugh, then suddenly went quiet.

Tohru pointed ahead on the road. It came sluggishly down the road from the Western mountain, through the heart of Sotoba. Further down that road was one house's family on a plot of land without a fence or anything else in it, where the truck stopped. They opened the container of the truck and piled their luggage in.

"Moving? At this hour." Tohru said as if amazed.

"They might be running away into the night. Literally."

Tohru laughed. Natsuno simply shrugged his shoulders. Come to think of it, said Tohru, seeing off the workers in mover's clothes as he continued. "The wife at Sanyasu ran away, I heard?"

"Mm?"

"There's a family called that in Naka-Sotoba. They're officially Yasumori, but. They say that Sanyasu's wife disappeared, like. That in the morning when they woke up she wasn't there."

"She ran away from home?"

"Guess so. She was a younger wife but like it sounds like she didn't get along well with her in-laws. She was always disagreeing with her husband, then like that finally their love went cold and she walked out, the story goes."

"That happens even out here?"

Tohru gave a wry smile. "Don't make fun of the country. Even out here normal stuff happens in its own way."

"Well then, I underestimated the place."

Natsuno said, Tohru giving him a light nudge in the back and starting to walk. Natsuno turned back a moment a bit to look at the truck. They probably weren't running away into the night. Such an imposing, huge truck, was hardly going to hide them from anything he thought. Even so, he wasn't satisfied with just saying they were moving at night.

Suddenly Natsuno remembered that he had heard the words 'moving at night' a while before too. Right, that was when they were moving in. The owners of Kanemasa. They moved in at night and then---Natsuno tilted his head. He'd heard rumors that they'd moved in and that the owners had been seen but Natsuno had never seen the owners that were now living there. As Tohru said, it ended without any connection to him at all. So long as Natsuno could leave in two years according to plan.

"What's up?" Tohru turned back to look at him.

It's nothing, Natsuno murmured jogging to catch up. Tohru smiled.

"... Jealous?"

Natsuno's scowled.

"That's not it!"

Part 3

On Monday, as soon as Ohkawa Tomio heard Matsumura's voice on the phone he shouted. "Matsu, you punk, what the hell time do you think it is?!"

"I'm sorry." Matsumura's voice which normally sounded weak willed sounded like the hum of an insect over the phone now.

"We've gotten all kinds of orders this morning. Then it's going on noon and you still ain't shown. You gotta know Mondays're busy, but. Whadda you think I pay your salary for? If you got the time to call in, then just hurry up and come in!"

"....Uhm, about that."

Matsumura's voice was weak, and on top of that halting. This man's always like this, Ohkawa though clicking his tongue in his mind. Matsumura Yasuzou was ten years older than Ohkawa but it was a match as to who was more capable between he and his son Atsushi, Ohkawa thought. Matsumura was a coward by nature, so he just didn't have the guts to do anything wreckless without thinking trying to show off like Atsushi. That was why the only

difference was that he could be at ease in trusting him with collecting payments. Other than that, his uselessness and his inability to give a firm and quick answer to anything brought out the same irritation in Ohkawa with only minor technical differences.

"If you got an excuse, say it when you get here. I ain't got the time to be having no leisurely phone chat."

Matsumura tried to get something out, but Ohkawa overtook him. He called to the young worker bringing in the beer cases in a loud voice.

"Oi, where're you parking? That ain't no place to be unloading!"

The young man making the delivery was about Atsushi's age. He turned the same resentful eyes on Ohkawa. It was a face he'd never seen before.

"Behind the storehouse. Go around the side, the side. You pack 'em up in front of the store and we can't do business. I always tell youse to drive down the alley, but. What the hells you kids' problem!"

Without answering that, the young man gave a single sharp glare to Ohkawa returning the load to the truck.

"Uhm.... Boss, the truth is, though?"

Watching the truck back up, Ohkawa, still holding the phone, remembered that Matsumura was on the other end again.

"To hell with what the damned truth is, already. You've been sniveling since this call started, what's up with you?"

"It's, uhm.... my daughter, uhm."

That was when at last Ohkawa realized Matsumura's voice was mingled with tears.

"Your daughter---Yasuyo-chan, eh?"

She was in about her mid twenties? She was nothing like her father, a brisk, level headed, good girl.

"....That's, uhm, she's gone, and."

"Gone? You're tryin' to say she died?"

"This morning, she was sick, I called an ambulance, but just now, it's come to a head.So, that's why."

His wife Kazuko made a dubious face as she looked to Ohkawa. Receiving her questioning gaze, Ohkawa gave her a nod.

"...I don't even know.... what I'm supposed to do now." Matsumura's voice was interrupted by sobs.

"You dumbass. At times like this, what's gonna happen if at least you don't get it together? Where're you now? The hospital? Which hospital? Aa---Anyway, I'll be right there. You called the regional manager?"

Yes he thought, no he thought, Matsumura couldn't give a clear response. Ohkawa once again said that, anyway, he was coming there as he hung up the phone. Kazuko could hardly wait for that, quickly opening her mouth.

"Gone, you said, who? You can't possible mean Matsumura-san's Yasuyo-chan, right?"

"It's possible enough to be true!"

Dear, Kazuko said. Atsushi had overheard while stocking the shelves and said, "What a waste" impudently, causing Ohkawa to glare at his son.

"Gotta go help him out. After all, Matsu's that kinda guy, you know." While he was speaking, possibly finished with unloading the cargo, the young man brought the delivery slip with him into the shop. Ohkawa carelessly signed it and took the receipt. "Anyway, probably oughtta call up the Kami-Sotoba regional manager too, huh? Matsu and his wife ain't the most reliable 'n all."

"That's true.I wonder if perhaps I should go too?"

"Go on. The deceased's still at the hospital so there's no rush. Before you leave the store call up the customers and say there's been a misfortune at the shop and deliveries'll be running late, yeah? The urgent ones we'll leave to Atsushi, the rest we'll push to another day."

Kazuko nodded. Her husband had a violent, short temper, but he was certainly not an unfeeling man, and while he was prone to fault finding he was equally prone to looking after those with faults. At times like this, without a

doubt it'd be all right if left to her husband.

Ohkawa went to the back of the shop to look for Kami-Sotoba's regional manager's contact information. Kazuko drew the delivery memo slips towards herself and found the accounting book with the destination's phone numbers in the desk drawer. Coming from the depths of the house, perhaps told the situation by Ohkawa, her mother-in-law Namie appeared.

"Yasuyo-chan died, you say? The deaths keep coming this year, don't they."

"They do, don't they. Just a while ago," so she started when Kazuko's hand stopped. She wanted to say that Shimizu Gardening had just had a funeral but, there was something weighing on her even more than that. "...Say, Mother? Are there people who sleep with their eyes half open, do you suppose?"

"There probably are, aren't there? I've head about them."

They must, Kazuko said to herself.

"What is it? Why do you ask?"

To Nami's question Kazuko found herself frowning. "Yesterday, I went to Ohsawa-san's place, from the post office. Somewhere or another I hear Ohsawa-san seemed to be sick, so I thought I'd make a get well visit and see how he was. It wasn't anything special, his wife had been saying but when she opened the sliding door in the living room, I saw him sleeping through the gap."

The bedroom had a window and was brighter than even the living room. Ohawa was lying down facing the living room, so she had a good look at his face. His eyes were half lidded and unblinking, his body unmoving. His complexion was deathly pale, looking somehow flaccid, a strange sensation as if he had keeled over with old age.

"He looked like he had died."

Impossible, Namie said with a frown. "That just couldn't be, could it?"

"That's what I thought, but. Still, his face looked like that of a corpse! I couldn't very well say 'he's dead, isn't he?' to his wife but while I asked if it wasn't very bad, his wife said that it wasn't anything serious, that he was sleeping well."

"Then, that's it isn't it? If his wife said so."

That's true, Kazuko murmured. She saw Ohkawa off as he barreled out, tended to a few odd tasks, asked Namie to watch the store, then Kazuko prepared herself. It couldn't be helped; Atsushi couldn't be left in charge of the store while they were out. At that time, her reliable daughter and second son were at school.

She trotted out of the shop towards Kami-Sotoba. On the way she passed by the front of the post office. For some reason, Kazuko's feet stopped, looking up to the second story that was the residence.

(...That was the face of a dead man.)

No matter what she couldn't shake that impression. As Kazuko thought to go into the post office, she realized the shutter door was still drawn down. Bewildered that there wasn't even a sign, Kazuko looked around. Her eyes met with Kumi from the Gotouda Clothing Shop across the street. Before she could enter the shop, Kumi came out herself.

"Say, what's going on, here?"

Kazuko pointed to the post office and Kumi tilted her head. Kumi's aged face seemed colored with surprise.

"About that, they've moved, don't you know. The Ohsawa-sans."

That can't be, Kazuko murmured. "That shouldn't be. Just last night I'd met with them."

"It was last night. In the middle of the night just past two, I suppose? A truck stopped out front, it was so loud I was woken up. When I got up, they were carrying their luggage out, it was a real surprise."

"That's---but, the husband was sick!"

Kumi gave a serious nod. "The moving company staff had to carry him into the car. He was wrapped all up in a blanket. I hurried out and caught the missus to ask what on earth was happening but she just said 'we have to move, so' and with just that and not neighborly word, she rode off in the truck!"

"My.... that's!"

"Nagata-san and the family weren't even contacted, it seems like. This morning he came to go to work as usual and lingered in front of the shutter. Why, I never new Ohsawa-san was the type of person to do something this outrageous!"

Me neither, Kazuko nodded. Ohsawa's half-lidded sleeping face (...a face that appeared dead) flashed before her eyes. A fluttering of fear bubbled up in her stomach. What could it have been, that unknown, terrible feeling?

Part 4

On Tuesday at the end of the work day the band saw's roar was still echoing through the Ohtsuka Sawmill. Seishin looked at spectacle with deep emotion. The belt like band saw formed a bridge towards the rood of the sawmill building, sawdust falling and gathering from there; when he was small he would go into the Yasumori Sawmill and play, crawling under such gatherings. The pool of sawdust was more fascinating to children than a sand pit, and at the bottom of that pit were rhinoceros beetle and stag beetle larvae and pupa to be found.

There would be sawdust all over their bodies and of course they'd be scolded by their mothers, and the saw dust would get in beneath their clothing often, a feeling that was insufferably uncomfortable to a child, but it just meant that it held enough to be worth paying that price.

Gazing nostalgically at the sawmill, he didn't realize that Ohstuka Takayuki was nearby until he called out to him.

"If it isn't the Junior Monk!"

Called out to, at last Seishin returned to his senses. Meeting eyes with Takayuki who was still clad in work clothes, he hastily bowed his head.

"It has been a while."

When he raised his head, his eyes met with those of Ohtsuka Kichigorou who was supervising the saw. Kichigorou made an unpleasant face and averted his

gaze.

The Ohtsuka Sawmill was a rival to the Maruyasu Sawmill. In the village there were several sawmill families but out of all of them it was these two who stood out from the rest in size. They had once been a parish family and he had heard they were even involved in the Parish Representative Committee but when Seishin went to college and returned from his ascetic training at the head temple to help here, they had already been extracted from the parish. Kichigorou's wife had entered a new religion, and Kichigorou had likewise joined into it. Seishin's father Shinmei apparently tried coming many times on foot attempting to pursue them. It was probably due to the antagonism from that time that Kichigorou didn't get on well with those of the temple.

In regards to that his son Takayuki was either unaware of the antagonism from those days or he knew about it but didn't think of it as anything to be effected by, as he didn't get along with him exceptionally poorly. Even though he'd seen him about the village here and there, he'd never made a particularly sour face at him.

"It has been a while, hasn't it."

Takayuki showed a smile.

"It has been some time since we have made contact. I apologize for intruding while you're working."

"What might be the matter?"

"Just recently, I had overheard that Yasuyuki-san had passed away, you see."

Yeah, Takayuki said, showing an expression as if he had thrust into a sore spot. "For that, you came all the way out. ---Thank you very much."

Takayuki took off his work gloves and put them in the pocket of his work suit. While wiping his sweat he motioned to the office. "Well, come in. We don't have anything to offer beyond tea, though."

"Are not you in the middle of work? I had only thought to come to offer incense."

"It's all right. I was just thinking of wrapping up for the day."

Takayuki smiled and conveyed something to someone nearby, then went to the previously gestured office. Entering the office at the edge of the sawmill, Takayuki's wife Hiroko was at office desk with an open account book. Noticing Seishin, she stood and bowed a salutation to him.

"Oh my, it has been a while!"

"He says he's come to offer condolences for Yasuyuki."

When told that by Takayuki, she had a seemingly troubled smile as she said her thanks.

"I'm sorry for being so sudden. I had thought that it might be too forward of me, but."

"It's quite all right. Thank you very much. To think that you would take the trouble to come all this way--"

Hiroko smiled, though she looked to be the definitive picture of someone crying, something that Seishin secretly felt with a pain in his conscience.

"For the time being, please enjoy the tea," Takayuki said, taking the pitcher of cold barley tea from the corner of the office and presenting him with a cup of it. He motioned towards an open seat.

"Truly, the occasion was very sudden...."

You've said it, Takayuki said with a forced smile. "He was a guy whose only good point was his health, I couldn't imagine that he would go before me."

I'm certain, Seishin replied quietly. Going by what Takayuki and Hiroko said, as expected Yasuyuki was suddenly bedridden. It was probably a cold, and such stereotypical lines were heard around here as well. They took it lightly, not thinking that it could possibly come to this. In the middle of the night suddenly he thought he had heard groaning sounds, and he was convulsing, Takayuki puzzled. "We called an ambulance and had him brought to the national hospital. Our hearts were in our stomachs. He was rushed immediately into surgery but he did not come out alive. It seems we didn't make it in time."

"Is that so....."

"It seems there were problems with his liver. His jaundice was so faint, we

didn't notice it ourselves, either. He wasn't a particularly heavy drinker, I didn't think there was any reason for there to be problems there. Really, this is what they mean when they say something is a complete surprise."

"This has been, I am most certain, a terribly difficult time.Have matters calmed?"

Yes they have, Takayuki said with a lonely smile. "When he first died, it was nothing but marital fights, though. I blamed his mother asking why she didn't notice anything, I was working with him, why didn't I notice, she said blaming me. On top of that, Father being Father said that it was because we didn't have enough faith, then the people around were blaming it on the new aged religion, we'd heard them saying showily, which didn't help."

That's, Seishin said, frowning. "That sort of thing isn't relevant at all, is it?"

"To have the Junior Monk say as much is, if I can speak honestly, very gratifying," Takayuki said as if deriding himself. "The bunch in the village---Ah, please do not take this as criticism of the temple---they're, as expected, critical of withdrawing from the parish. The temple and the village really are monolithic, and all. Actually, here and there, you know, people have been dragging away from us. We're like exiled outsiders, so I've thought before!"

Hiroko gave an interceding smile.

"Especially when, you remember, the old man was taken out of his position as the ward chief, wasn't he? It wasn't because of anything our household did, it was just that the old man was at that age but he'd gotten his belly button in a twist and said some unfortunate things, so things became unnecessarily complicated."

"Is that so...."

"For a while there, we got into nothing but fights everywhere." Takayuki forced a smile. "It was bleak inside the home, we were trying to have proper faith in our own way. Yet whenever we thought about why this happened to us, we thought, maybe we should lower our heads to the temple and return to the parish, or something."

"You musn't," Seishin promptly interjected. "It is not good for you to begin

thinking in such a way. Faith is something organic, it is not something that can be coerced. It is the fulcrum of one's personal freedom, and so we must not distort it unnaturally."

Takayuki gave a surprised seeming blink. Seishin returned to himself and unintentionally hung his head in shame.

"Pardon me. For speaking strangely."

No, Takayuki laughed. "To have you say as much is a relief. ---Yeah?"

Takayuki smiled and turned to Hiroko. Hiroko also nodded.

"Yes.... Really."

He imagined just how harshly condemned such a manner of speaking would be. Certainly the village was united around the temple. A firm sense of unity was built upon a firmly enforced exclusion principle. And of all things the Ohtsuka Sawmill had always served on the Parish Representative Committee. A so-called pillar of the temple to suddenly become estranged from the temple, so he could imagine how the parishioners would perceive that.

"....At the beginning it was like that, really, nothing but fights everywhere. Our successor had died, and we even talked about how we might as well close up the sawmill and move, but. When we said that, our second son who had gone to the city said he would inherit it for us. Ah, we really musn't give ourselves up to despair."

"That is truly so." As Seishin answered, he remembered the unpleasant face his gentle father had shown so many times. His father who had rarely made a displeased expression made a clear one whenever the conversation turned to the Ohtsuka Sawmill. He didn't particularly find fault with them but it was clear Shinmei had no patience when it came to this for the people around them. At those times Seishin, unable to comprehend why his father was angry, could not help feeling the faintest sense of something like despondency towards his father. Despondency may be too deep a word for it but he remembered thinking that he didn't need to make that face. Looking at the current case, it may have been precisely because Shinmei was so flagrantly unpleasant that the parishioners followed the head monk's will to criticize Takayuki and his family. When he thought of that, Seishin felt it inexcusable.

"Lately it's calmed down. It's a shame about Yasuyuki but, I have the feeling that the family can somehow get through this, you know?It is true that we miss him, but."

"I'm sure you must."

But somehow, you know, said Takayui looking out the window. "Maybe it's my age, but I've been missing a lot lately. A disheartened feeling or something. It might be the season, too."

Seishin, for some reason or other, nodded.

"The old man is getting to that age and all, I start to think he won't live forever, or things like that. A girl from the neighborhood had died on Bon, hadn't she?"

"Shimizu--Megumi-chan, you mean?"

"Yes, that's right. Shimizu-san's place's daughter. She was such a young little thing, too. Maybe it's because my own house has had a funeral; whenever I go walking in the village these days, I get the feeling I'm seeing too many funerals really. Thinking about it, the people of the village are mostly old people you know. The heat is hard on the elderly, and there must be many of them who are feeling down. A young one from the sawmill suddenly ran away from home and quit her job, too. The elderly in the neighborhood are disappearing before you know it too."

At Takayuki's recollection, Seishin's brows knit together.

"Now that you mention it," Hiroko interrupted. "Suzuki-san? He left, didn't he. He was the same age as Yasuyuki. The family moved, they said. Lately, there are a lot of stories like that."

Seishin blinked. Hiroko gave a lonely seeming smile.

"Has everyone come to hate Sotoba, I wonder?"

That might be the case, Seishin thought.

---Therefore thou art cursed, no longer one of the land, an eternal vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.

The village was like the hill, removing foreign substances.

(...It wouldn't be strange to come to hate it.)

Part 5

Seishin spread out his manuscript in the office. His eyes ran over the rewritten characters of the revised draft. In the silence of the night, the fading sound of God turning the pages echoed.

The older brother, ostracized from the hill for the sin of killing his little brother, roamed the wasteland. The little brother became a Shiki and followed him. The older brother didn't know why he went so far as to become that to follow him. Trying to look back on how his brother had been in life, as expected, he couldn't deduce his little brother's intentions. Far from deducing it, he couldn't even clearly recall his little brother before he was a Shiki. Nor himself the moment he killed his little brother, nor his sentiments at that time.

And, thought Seishin as he lowered the sharpened tip of the pencil to the paper like the tip of a sword. He

had to give up on surmising his little brother's true feelings again today. Whenever he tried to gauge his little brother's intent, without fail he would be obstructed in his groping quest for answers by his own confusion; while staring at him without any other means, regret gradually build up in his chest, and he declined to think any more beyond that.

Hanging his head in shame, gazing at the shadow the color of his own sin at his feet and then turning back, his eyes turned to the hill that, as he'd become accustomed to by now, didn't seem to be growing further away at all. Actually, his little brother was not chasing after him from behind. His little brother was surely waiting in front of him to receive him.

Above the hill the clouds parted, golden afterglow raining down incessantly. Within it was the white, clear, clear splendor. Enshrined at the top of the town, the unforgiving light shone towards him.

He had always, or at least for the time he had been on the hill, been taught that to the east of that garden was a vast wasteland but actually standing in the wasteland looking at the hill, the hill was enclosed from all four directions by the

wasteland. The reason that this land was said to be to the east may have only been because that was where the gate was.

The sterile and desolate lands fallen from God's hand was supposedly this place where he wandered but, in actuality, the greenery of the hill that existed in the middle of this sterile and desolate land was seen as a miracle of God, that hill beautifully arranged and placed in this wilderness.

Now he thought on it as mysterious. Did the wasteland exist around the hill or did the hill exist within the wasteland? Did the high ramparts enclosing the foot of the hill denote the terminus of God's order, or instead did it note the boundaries of God's miracle?

In either case, the hill was beautiful.

Seishin stopped for a bit and tilted his head. He was being chased by the hill. Would the hill he saw when turning back to look over the wilderness be seen as beautiful after all? Far from having any killing intent towards his brother, he didn't know the source of his own impulse.

That should have been to him a very shocking tragedy. In judgement for that, he was cursed and chased. That order that pressured him, the hill that he had been shut out of, was it something that he could praise so impartially?

(Of course, he could...)

He even now yearned for the hill he had been expelled from. From the beginning, that had been what he had intended.

In either case, the hill was beautiful. If he closed his eyes, he could remember how it looked to him.

Green fields drew gentle undulations, there white sheep herded, feeding in peace on the grass that spread out to the green forests. The houses that dotted it were lined together by a red stoned path, rising up towards the street where the sage lived, levying heavy taxes. The spire stood tall in the center of the town, at the top of which was the seat of God. None but the one chosen as the sage were allowed to climb it, and were they to climb it there would be not but the downpour of splendid light; it had no form of which to speak but clearly there existed a will there.

(And he worshiped that will.)

---Even though it ostracized him?

(To him, the hill was a place that should be loved....)

At the center of that spire shone on by the splendor, drawing concentric circles, spreading out and downward towards the outside, a single hill's mound was shaped.

Surrounding the spire was the temple where the sage lived, and around the temple was the stone paved town. The surrounding outskirts of the village were lined in sprawling forests. The beautiful and quiet forest of beautifully linked branches was itself enveloped in the blueish greens of the fields.

The green fields expanded without end, eventually the greenery being mixed at intervals with white stones and red clays. At the ends of the lands of gently undulating hills which green draped over like a moss were gigantic castle walls.

(Gigantic walls... Obstinate,

The sturdy ramparts, as if to shroud from the eyes of those who dwelt outside of it,

as if to reject the sinners exiled for eternity,

spread out, and then, at that eastern block, a small closed gate.

so that they could never return again...)

Seishin sighed hugely and abandoned his pencil. This is no good, he thought. His thoughts were slipping. He couldn't stop Ohtsuka Takayuki and Hiroko's faces from flashing faintly through some part of his mind

Sotoba was firmly united. On the other side of that unity was an obstinate tendency towards exclusion. Those who weren't parish families of the temple were, to the village, foreign substances. Rather, those who were formerly parish families that had defected from the temple would only naturally be seen as enemies more than foreign substances. They had cast off the faith that managed the villagers and took their leave for another faith of their choosing. Even when considering people's tendency to form groups, they couldn't help ostracizing those who those who were separated out like that.

But, Seishin thought. Why did groups of people have no choice but to act this way? Faith's foundation was of the heart, was it not something that brought

about public peace through people's hearts? That it was separating people, becoming a just cause for ostracizing people---and that nobody had misgivings nor shame about that, Seishin had a difficult time standing.

Gentle smiles for those who were internal, and while showing that affection and love, showing those on the outside cold indifference and cruel conduct. That two sidedness could be felt most bleakly. Or was he the only one who struggled with such things as this?

With a disheartened breath, Seishin piled up his manuscripts. He wanted to continue with it but his writing just wasn't flowing. All the more self-conscious of his struggles, he gave up and returned the manuscript to the drawer. In exchange he took out the memo pad with the notes he'd gathered but, he didn't even feel like opening it. Having given up on even that, Seishin stood. Leaving the office, he took the flash light off of the shelf in the entryway in hand and went outside.

The presence of fall hid within the winds that blew through the fir trees. The voices of the insects were, different from their summer timbre, sounding somehow lonely. He took a glance at the sleeping village and crossed the temple grounds. Pushing his way through the mountains, he knew that fall, hiding within the forest and its underbrush, was looking to come out of hiding. Walking quietly, he headed straight to the abandoned building. Nowhere in the village, trying to live secluded out here, in this sanctuary that was naturally looked upon as an enemy to the system and order of which the temple was a nucleus, the one drug out of here was---*him*.

As if to note the recluse's bitter mortification, the sanctuary inclined, falling into ruin. Entering within, there was the voice of one single cricket echoing desolately. The lonely chirping faded, then as if realizing that it had faded sounded again.

Seishin himself didn't remember when he lit the lamp. If he was just going to be spacing out doing nothing, he wouldn't need lamp light. None the less, he realized when he heard the sound of the sanctuary door opening that he might have remembered in his subconscious that Sunako had appeared once saying it was because she had seen the light.

When he turned his head, Sunako was walking down the short nave of the church. Brushing lightly along the backs of the benches lined up on one side,

light footsteps approached.

"Good evening."

"Hi," was all Seishin returned.

"I'm just saying this for your benefit, but this is the first time I've come here since the last time. I've been behaving well in my home, you know. So, do somehow overlook it this time, won't you?"

Seishin smiled and nodded.

"And for the record, I had applied bug spray before coming, and as you can see I've worn long sleeves with closed cuffs. I'm wearing two layers of stockings, you know. I do hope that with this Muroi-san understands that I am not trying to disregard his warnings?"

"....I know."

I'm glad, Sunako murmured, taking a seat on the bench directly in front of Seishin. She sat little kit on the bench, both of her elbows on the back of the pew.

"Ebuchi and mother were most grateful. Of course, they absolutely won't leak it to the outside. ---To begin with, they wouldn't have either way, but."

"I see..."

"Is it the same as ever? You look depressed."

Seishin smiled bitterly. "I see.... I guess it is as usual. It looks like things have gotten a bit worse. But I can't see any solution."

Sunako nodded as if to urge him on, so Seishin briefly expressed that he'd been looking for common points amongst the victims but, regardless, hadn't been able to find any clues.

"With your duties to the temple, even while you have a job as an author, it must be hard. And yet with no results, it's a given that Muroi-san would be making such a face."

"Do I look that depressed?"

"You do. The same as last time. You look down." Sunako said with a small laugh.

"Every time we meet here, it is certain that Muroi-san will be depressed, isn't it? Is it possible you run away to here when you are depressed?"

Seishin blinked. "Ah.... Indeed. You may be right."

"You weren't aware of it?"

"I guess I wasn't. That's right---it does certainly seem to be like this more often,

overwhelmingly."

"It's better not to be too discouraged. After all, Muroi-san is not an epidemic specialist."

Seishin smiled faintly and shook his head. "It's not as if I'm particularly down about the lack of results."

"Then, why? Did some one pass away again?"

"No---. I've been following the victim's footprints, you see, and it's more than I'd come to know some not-too pleasant things."

"Not too pleasant things?"

Mm, Seishin looked out into the half destroyed interior of the sanctuary.

"Sotoba is a good place. There are many good tempered people living here, and it makes for a peaceful cycle. But because of that, the power to push aside any foreign substances is strong."

Sunako tilted her head, and then nodded as if understanding something. "I think that I understand. To be warm to those close to you means to be cold to those who are not. ---Is it like that?"

Right, Seishin nodded. Sunako put her chin in both of her hands, resting on the back of the pew. ".....And so, Muroi-san has come to hate the villagers?"

"No. That isn't it."

"You've come to hate the village maybe. So while you're suffering for the village's sake, you're sickened by it."

"That isn't what it is. Because I think that the power to gather people also being the power to exclude is an unavoidable providence. Surely that's the kind of being humans are. So I don't condemn it. But, I do think it's a little bit of a shame."

"If that's the case, then you'll have to cheer up. You have to investigate it properly and hurry up and solve what's happening. If the disease spreads like this, the villagers will end up noticing, and then Muroi-san will experience something even more painful."

That pricked at Seishin's heart. Gazing seriously at Sunako's face, he understood that that was true.

Indeed, it was so. If the situation kept worsening like this, eventually, the villagers would notice the existence of the sickness. If they did that, what would happen? The unions that were protected by going so far as to exclude others

would be cut. Be they members of the same parish, be they bound by blood or regional bonds, fearing contamination, they would begin to ostracize each other. There was no way to avoid it.

"....It's just as you say."

"Isn't it? People are fragile when cornered. They're very weak beings."

Seishin nodded. ---Yes, this was no time to be down. He didn't have the time to struggle with something like this.

And, in his own heart Seishin felt shamed. It was no time for escaping into his manuscripts either. Even if just a moment sooner, he had to find a way to stop this calamity. Before the village brought about its own end from within.

Cultural and Translation Notes

4 - 1

MODS - Multiple Organ Dysfunction Syndrome

, previously known as MOF for Multiple Organ Failure. MODS was the only one not defined explicitly in the chapter. Commonly the result of sepsis which leads to reduces in blood flow to the relevant organ systems. In typical MODS, this is because of disseminated intravascular coagulation (DIC, mentioned in chapter) syndrome, or abnormal blood clotting which leads to organ systems breaking down due to not getting enough blood to function.

4 - 2

Gripping your thumb in your fist

when a hearse or funeral procession passes by is a childhood superstition, similar to the one avoiding stepping on cracks to keep your mother from breaking her back in English. The thumb in Japanese is called the oya-yubi; oya is Japanese for parent(s) so it could be read as the parent finger. The idea is that

you're hiding them from death.

Japanese tradition calls

salt

a purifier. Salt is placed in piles in front of restaurants supposedly to ward off evil as well as to usher in patrons. These can be seen out front of many businesses.

[Sample image](#)

from Wikimedia Commons. Accepted a tradition as it is, if Chigusa had never had one before, it would be potentially offensive to suddenly put one out because so many patrons were coming in after funerals.

At funerals small packets of salt may be offered to throw in front of your house before returning to ward off evil spirits from following you inside.

Chapter 5

Part 1

"Boss, it has been a while."

Called out to by Seishin, Shimizu Masaji who was working in the plantation spread out behind his house turned to look. "Ah--Junior Monk!"

"You are putting your energy into work, I see."

The old man stood up, taking his hat in hand and bowing his salt-and-pepper haired head. At Masaji 's feet were a line of green seedlings for some sort of plant.

Shimizu Gardening also did landscaping and took part in wholesale sales of young trees. If asked by villagers, he would also sell them directly. Seishin's own mother Miwako sometimes came to buy seedlings for the garden.

"It is still hot these days, isn't it. What may I do for you today?"

"Actually, the other day, I had belatedly heard that Ryuuji-san had died."

Ah, Masaji's expression clouded. "That's, well, thank you very much." He put down his plow in the bucket and motioned towards the house. "Well first, please, do come inside."

Seishin bowed his head slightly and followed after Masaji after he stood.

"I was surprised. The last time I'd seen him he seemed healthy..."

You said it, Masaji said while climbing up onto the porch with a sigh. As guided Seishin entered into the tatami room and continued in front of the family altar. The altar was decorated with a new photo and mortuary tablet. His son Ryuuji was according to the records 41, and worked, he believed, at an accounting office. As he offered the incense and folded his hands together, Masaji brought in the barley tea.

"It isn't much but, please. You'll have to forgive me, today my daughter-in-law

is out. I thought we had had some snacks somewhere, but."

"Please don't fuss. ---You must be depressed as well, Boss. Have your feelings settled?"

Masaji gave a forced smile. "It hasn't connected with me yet. He really was a healthy fella, after all. I went out to work like always, then there was talk that he collapsed at the office. When I rushed to the hospital, he'd already lost consciousness. And then he never opened his eyes since."

"I had heard that there were heart problems, but?"

Masaji shook his head, saying not at all. "During his spring check up, he was fit as a fiddle. The heart failure was so sudden. ---No, he did have signs he wasn't well, come to think of it. It's just, it only seemed he was out of it at the time. I wondered if he'd stayed up late or was hung over and it came to this.

Honestly...." Masaji trailed off. "It's only something I remember because it came to this. It's something I only remember now that you mention it, looking back. I didn't think anything of it the day I saw it, just going out like always into the fields, not even taking a good look at his face."

"Then, he wasn't especially bedridden or anything of that nature?"

"He wasn't really bedridden.No, this whole year, my son's health hasn't been something I could really sum up. He might have been sick but it wasn't enough for even my daughter-in-law to notice, so I didn't think anything in particular about it at all."

Is that so, Seishin murmured. Whether Shimizu Ryuuji had it or not wasn't clear. Dying within a few days of his family noticing was customary but Ryuuji was a few days faster than that. It might have been that his case progressed exceptionally fast, or it might have been completely unrelated to the relevant matter. Seishin couldn't ascertain which it was.

"But... As this was truly something sudden, it must have been difficult."

"More than on me, it's his wife. I shouldn't say this, but these things do happen. It's just, I feel for my daughter-in-law and grandson. All said, I've lost my spouse, so without my daughter-in-law and grandson, I'd be alone. That grandson come next spring will graduate from high school and go on to college

and to get a job, so once he's out of the house, it'll just be two old people with no blood relatives left. I told her she could go back to her own family, but. Shuuji isn't here anymore but still having her there to water me on my death bed makes me feel sorry for her." As Masaji spoke, an unaffected but forced smile floated up onto his face. "In the past, I would've said 'well she married into this family now so' but the times have changed, so."

Is that so, Seishin thought. In the village, parents and children lived in multi-generational households as a matter of course. But, the concept of family was indeed changing. A yet incomplete transformation. It was... jarring.

"...Still, she said she couldn't by any means abandon me on my own but I'm sure it's weighing on her. Even though having her spouse go on ahead of her is calamity enough, having head-ache inducing problems that she does makes you feel for her. He's being paid his retirement sum, she'll at least get that, but."

Seishin tilted his head. Masaji's smile became all the more wry. "The day my son collapsed, you know? On that day, that Ryuuji, I don't know what he was thinking but it seems he suddenly put in his retirement notice. Me and my daughter in law didn't know about it, don't know what was in his heart at the time. His office didn't process it but that Ryuuji said he had to stop that day, shouting caustically that he didn't need severance pay or his pay check. He was fighting with the accountant, then suddenly collapsed, it seems. When we heard that at the hospital, his wife went ghostly pale. We still need that money to raise our grandson, and all."

"That's..."

"Still, the accountant was compassionate, he made like it never happened for her. He died in the office but it's being handled as if he retired, which is a big help. Really---That son of mine, what was he thinking?"

The old man looked up at the photo of the deceased.

"When they get to that age, we're as good as strangers. Even if we live together, that's because this is the country; if it were the city, he'd move out and have his own home at his age. It's a matter of appearances. He can't go on asking his father for advice about everything. So, even while it's obvious...."

That's true, Seishin murmured. "Then, was Ryuuji-san no longer offering his

assistance to you as the Boss? In the past, I had seen you working together very many times, hadn't I?"

"Nah, not lately, I guess. In the past he didn't unless we were really needing the help. We do landscape gardening, but that isn't what we focus on, so we don't have many hands on deck for that kind of work."

"Then, he did not have any intent to inherit the business to become the next Boss, I suppose."

"I don't think he did. I don't think he was of a mind for it. I didn't intend for him to either, after all."

And so it seemed that Masaji didn't come and go to many places throughout the village. While he thought of it, he asked about Masaji's working arrangements. He asked about whether he'd come and gone from any homes, whether he'd gone to Yamairi, or how about the Maruyasu sawmill, whether Ryuuji had ever gone to such places with him. He had intended to ask indirectly but Masaji himself apparently hadn't gone to Yamairi or to Maruyasu, so it seemed Ryuuji had no connections with them either. Nor did he go into the mountains. Masaji's household didn't own any mountain lands. Masaji and Ryuuji both lived in Sotoba but they made their livings almost entirely in Mizobe, so as far as interacting with their neighbors it seemed they had no such ties at all.

"We do have relatives in Monzen, though," said Masaji with a strained smile. "In the past, any time anything happened, we'd be coming and going from each other's places often but since my cousin died, our ties had been cut. This isn't an age where you go to visit your dead father's cousin as a relative anymore, is it?"

That's true, was all Seishin answered.

Leaving Masaji's house, Seishin went towards Naka-Sotoba. He visited the elder Koike, the funeral manager. Hirosawa Takatoshi who died on August 11th had been a resident of Naka-Sotoba. As Seishin had no connections with that Hirosawa household, for the time being he would try visiting Koike, who could be called an influential man in Naka-Sotoba but it seemed Koike didn't know them very well either.

Human relations were interwoven like a complicated net, Seishin had felt. He had the impression that the people of the village had a regional bond that expanded throughout the village. But, that regional bond had at some point had been severed at certain points. Without the people themselves being conscious of it, the village followed the trend of the era, being dismantled bit by bit.

So this is how it is, Seishin thought. Seishin himself was at the center of the parish families. Being the focal point of so many complicated interpersonal relationships, he hadn't sensed the changes that had taken place. But, bit by bit the village was changing. ----Seishin wasn't the only one who thought that. The elder Koike too shook his head with a sigh.

"In the past, if you asked me about someone from somewhere, I'd know what kind of person they were and how they made a living as if they were my own relative or family, but."

"Is that so?"

"I intended to at least get to know his parents. His father was grieving about it. It seems he suddenly collapsed in Mizboe. And they say he collapsed in a Pachinko parlor, like. He was sure he was going to work but he'd quit his job."

Eh? Seishin asked at that. "His job, he quit?"

"Seems like it. Without a word to his parents. For two or three days he'd been sick, right, unsteady on his feet, but he still went out in his business suit, so they thought he must be going to the company as usual but the company said he quit three days ago. But he was wasting his time at the Pachinko parlor. And that's where he collapsed."

Seishin blinked. What on earth was this? It was similar to Shimizu Ryuuji----.

Perhaps not noticing Seishin's bewilderment, the elder Koike forced a smile. "It's a lonely way to go but there's no helping it, is there? It's sad that we're not long for this world." With that said, Koike tilted his head. "But, what is with these continuing deaths, I wonder, huh?"

Part 2

Monday, September 18th was Megumi's 35th day memorial service.

"With this it's the end of the mourning period it looks like," said her mother Sachiko on the way to Megumi's house. It was past the middle of September and the boiling heat wave had receded.

"End of the mourning period?"

"Forty-nine days they say, don't they. After the 49th day the dead person's soul leaves the home. Since you're not mourning any more it's the end of the mourning. The 49th Memorial day service is when they're really supposed to end the mourning but that'd be in October. They say it's not good for the mourning period to span three months. So they're cutting it short and having the end of mourning on the 35th day it looks like."

Kaori hung her head. That's strange, she thought. Whether Megumi's soul was in the house or whether it wasn't didn't change the fact that Megumi had died. Yet when 49 days had passed, you were supposed to clear away the sadness and the sympathy.

And in Megumi's case it wasn't even 49 days. It was still the 35th day, so even though Megumi's soul still hadn't moved on, it was like they were hurrying to chase her out, she thought.

(Megumi.... You poor thing....)

Dying was piteous. You were just cleaned away like this. For certain at this rate she would become "something finished." Certainly Megumi's life had finished on that summer day but Megumi's death had just Megumi, only 45 days had passed. Even though it was something that would never be "finished" so to speak.

Kaori followed with her head hung behind Sachiko who seemed somehow relieved. When they reached Shimizu Megumi's house, there were many guests gathered who, like Sachiko, had seemed to somehow have felt too at ease. Only Megumi's parents and grandfather didn't seem as if they were getting a burdensome weight off their shoulders. They were just as they'd been during the funeral, looking grief stricken. Kaori was just a little comforted by that.

There was still time before the service started. Sachiko went to help in the kitchen. Kaori moved to do the same but was told to refrain from joining the mourning crew's women. Indeed the kitchen was already full with women

attendants from the neighborhood, so as urged Kaori went to the second floor. Megumi's room was as it had been, her nameplate still hanging on her door. Of course it was---at least until today, Megumi was in this house. Or was she no longer here? When did Megumi depart from the house? Would she be driven out once the service started?

(Almost like it's an exorcism.)

The Buddhist chants given were the same after all, so maybe that was exactly what it was in truth. Offering scriptures, Megumi's soul would, in pain, leave the home. With no choice she would leave the home, then everyone would say good grief and clear away Megumi's death.

(Even this room...) Kaori thought while looking over the room as it had been not even changed in the slightest. (Will it be cleaned away, I wonder?)

Kaori was shocked by her own thoughts. It was because she was imagining the room as an empty cavity, with her furniture and personal artifacts promptly removed.

"That's.... no."

The room where Megumi lived. This was where Megumi was. Megumi's desk, Megumi's bed. Even if there was indeed no longer an owner, they were Megumi's things, not anybody else's. The things Megumi cherished. The curtains and bed cover were chosen by Megumi. The accessories and miscellaneous goods bought with her allowance, Megumi's heart would be broken when they were gathered up. The stuffed animal Kaori had given her as a present, mementos of trips, they were all things Megumi cherished, so nobody but Megumi had the right to dispose of them. And yet she disappeared from this world. And likewise traces of Megumi's life would be wiped away.

She didn't want that. Megumi's death shouldn't be something that could be so easily forgotten like this. When somebody died, it was supposed to be a more weighty disaster. One you never forgot throughout your life, like a wound in the heart. It wasn't supposed to be something so frivolous you could put some kind of 35 day limit on it.

Kaori looked around her surroundings in panic. She had the feeling that soon now the women helper of the mourning crew would be coming up to clear

away the room. It was the end of mourning, so by the end of today Megumi would be gone from the house. So Megumi didn't need a room, they'd say.

Should she try asking Megumi's parents? Please don't dismiss Megumi, don't take apart her room at your convenience. Please don't clear Megumi away like that.

---If she asked that, would they listen to it?

Sachiko's face floated before her eyes. Her mother who said to clear away Megumi's death. If it was Sachiko, she was surely saying the same to Megumi's parents. Clear it away, that in order to do that it was better to take apart Megumi's room. Hiroko might have held the same sentiments.

They weren't in mourning anymore so let's clear it away, and enjoy life in Megumi's stead. Any and everything in Megumi's room, sorted and disposed of. ---It might be. What was here, all of it was very important to Megumi and yet adults didn't usually hold any respect for what children called "important things"

"That's no good, something like that."

At least something, Megumi thought, her eyes wandering the room. Before it was disposed of, Kaori had to take something from here for safe keeping. Yes--- she should do that. Some souvenir of Megumi. Kaori wouldn't forget. She wouldn't put her away. She would cherish and preserve "Megumi."

Her eyes looked around the desk. The calendar beneath the desk mat was still on August. Megumi's calendar was halted there. When she had put it in place, she probably didn't think that this would be the last month. There was a text book she was only a third of the way through, stationary with an unopened seal on it.

(....Megumi's not here anymore.)

Kaori examined Megumi's shelves and drawers, searching for "Megumi" herself. All she found were nothing but fragments of Megumi, making her realize all the more that Megumi was no longer here. There was no Megumi. That existence had vanished. What remains here were fragments that were far far short of "Megumi."

Searching about her as if about to cry, Kaori's hand stopped. Beneath the deskmat, within the calendar she found the postcard.

Megumi's writing. A late summer greeting written for him. Only having it written, without being able to send it, Megumi died. Even though it was so precisely written.

(Megumi.... you wanted to send this, didn't you?)

Thinking of that, the tears spilled out. While crying, Kaori snuck it into her pouch. This was short of "Megumi" Even this was not "Megumi." But, Megumi wouldn't want her family to see this. If her room was being taken apart it would be found, and then this unsent late summer greeting would be thrown straight away. That was the one thing she didn't want to let happen.

"It's all right, Megumi...." She wouldn't let them throw it away. She hugged her pouch closely. "...Let's go home together."

She'd bring her back to her house. After today, she couldn't be here anymore after all. Until that 49th day, she could be in Kaori's room. Until the day she naturally went off somewhere far away.

"It's all right, I won't clear you away."

Part 3

When the door opened, Hasegawa looked up. "Well, well. This is unusual."

It was the electronics shop's Katou. It wasn't that Katou coming to the shop was rare but today he had brought his son Yuusuke along. Hasegawa put out two glasses on the counter in front of the two seated at the counter. "You're together. Today is---Ah, it's Sunday, huh?"

The day of the week often slipped his mind. Creole didn't have set closed days. Since it was a shop opened originally as a hobby, so they planned to treat it as something they could close whenever it was a pain but Hasegawa enjoyed having the shop open more than he expected, so it was largely opened every day of the year. In the past the shopping district was habitually closed on

Sundays as if it were only natural but lately there were more stores open on Sunday, and while before shops closed at five or six, this too was being slowly stretched out into later hours. This too may have been what they called a sign of the times perhaps.

"Yuusuke-kun, what'll it be?"

When asked, Yuusuke's eyes lowered as if shy. He'd always been a shy child. He was particularly reticent towards Hasegawa but since Hasegawa had lost his son, he was indiscriminately doting on little boys. He was always comparing them to his son, and in that remembering this and that, which may have been the reason. When he'd first lost him, remembering was sad but four years had passed and now nothing but nostalgia warmed his heart.

"Mm?" When pushed to decide Yuusuke responded 'ice cream' quietly. Katou smiled. "Yuusuke picked up someone's wallet today."

"Oh ho?"

"It seems it was a girl's, there was an ID card in it. He brought it to the police to turn it in and we were going to have ice cream as a reward, I said."

"I see. That's very good, Yuusuke-kun."

"But he wasn't there, the resident officer." Yuusuke said, making a troubled face as he looked up to his father.

"That's right," he nodded to his son before looking to Hasegawa. "Hasegawa-san, have you met the replacement resident officer?"

Nope, Hasegawa murmured. Takami-san died, and afterwards an officer named Sakaki took his place.

"About that? I have never seen him either. It's always vacant isn't it, the police substation."

"Isn't it. ...That's strange."

"Tashiro-san tried to peek in a couple of times though. Since the book shop is catty-corner from the police box. It looks like he isn't a very sociable person. Even calling out to him he doesn't reply, Tashiro-san was scowling."

"Heh...." Hasegawa offered out an especially large bowl of ice cream. "Even

though you went through the trouble, it's a shame, isn't it?"

So he said with a smile to Yuusuke. Thank you, he said in a small voice. Watching over that with a smile, Katou said "I left a note and left the wallet on top of the desk, though. But, is it all right for him to never be there?"

"That's true. Well, it's a peaceful village, and Takami-san was also always saying he was bored, he was bored. But I'm not so sure now. If every time you go by, the resident officer isn't around, it's still a little worrisky, isn't it?"

Yes, Katou nodded.

"...The Kirishikis at Kanemasa are one example; the people moving in here lately seem to mostly be the withdrawn type, don't they?"

"You've said it. I've only heard rumors they've come, I've never seen them, it's been nothing but those types. It leaves a strange impression doesn't it, very much so."

Part 4

Seishin finished chanting the sutras and turned back around. The people of the Ohkawa family bowed their heads.

"Thank you very much," Ohkawa Tomio said as Kazuko brought in the tea. It was Ohkawa Gigorou who died in Yamairi's 49th day after death. Has that much time passed already? thought Seishin.

"Now it's a load off of our shoulders. Even for that old buzzard, you gotta take care of the mortuary tablet you know?"

Seishin had no particular comment. Keeping quiet he took the tea cup put out in hand. It was a desolate end of mourning attended only by family. Gigorou had children who came with their spouses, and they came with their own children but maybe it wasn't worth coming to the memorial services. Each of them had moved so far away so when you thought of that maybe it seemed obvious but he still couldn't help thinking it felt lonely.

Sotoba's unity was firm. It was firm in its consciousness of who was 'in' and at the same time that firm exclusionary principle rested upon that. Maybe that

was why there was a tendency for all of those who had left the society of the village, without even a one percent exception rate, shirked the village as if they'd been dispossessed by an evil spirit on leaving. Once they moved out, the person themselves as well as those who had been around them probably had the feeling that they were now outsiders, Seishin thought.

"Either way, this is just one part of your day. Seems the Shimizu's got a service today too. The Junior Monk must be working hard."

"No. I am sure it is hard on the Boss as well."

You said it, Ohkawa said shaking his head. "Even just a while ago, yeah? Our Matsu's place's daughter died. Even though she was still young."

Aa, Seishin nodded. He knew that he was talking about Kami-Sotoba's Matsumura Yasuyo.

"He himself could barely keep himself standing, his wife bein' who she is, sobbed and wailed herself about unconscious. In the end I was the one who gave the funeral. They say what comes twice comes thrice but this is one thing I don't wanna have to do a third time."

"Oh, yes."

"Since then Matsu's been taking off from work. Even though even with him here we're short on help. On top of that they've got a fresh face doing our deliveries now. Our arrangements are just falling apart in here. With all that it's been a whirlwind o' business to take care of in here. I'm tellin' ya."

That must be hard on you, Seishin replied at once. At Ohkawa's side his wife Kazuko looked to be unsettled over something.

"Even so, there have been many funerals, haven't there? It's like, I wonder just what has happened to this village, that's what I start thinking, these days."

Seishin didn't have the proper words to respond to that with. Suspicions were on the rise. And growing stronger at that. Soon enough the dam would break and it would come flowing out. And as for what would happen when it did---

Without knowing Seishin's thoughts, Kazuko only tilted her head. "How to put this... it feels strange. Something's wrong, but I can't put my finger on it. Just

recently too, the Post Office closed down, didn't it?"

As, Seishin nodded. Was it Mitsuo who had been talking about that? He'd heard they'd moved, if he recalled.

"It's just another strange story, don't you think?" Kazuko said, Ohkawa making a disgruntled face.

"You're still talking about that?"

"Well it

was

strange! You can say that because you didn't see it. But, it happened right before my eyes. The more I think about it the more I think those was the face of a dead man!"

Seishin blinked. "Uhm... What was that?"

Aa, Ohkawa made a sullen face. "From the post office, yeah? Ohkawa-san died, she keeps saying, this old girl. She went to pay a get-well visit and saw his face, saying it was a dead face. There's no way that'd be the case, but."

With his last words, he turned towards Kazuko. Kazuko looked at Ohkawa resentfully.

"Like I said, I really can't think of it any other way! And even so, that night they moved, didn't they? In the middle of the night!

/

think it's strange!"

"Pardon me but.... It was in the middle of the night?"

"That's just it!" Kazuko nodded. "They said he was sick, so I went to pay a get well visit. When I did, his pallor alone was enough to make me think he could possibly have already been dead. But, moving to another home when someone's ill? And it was at night no less! And furthermore when I went to pay a get well visit, there wasn't a single word about them moving. In the first place, the inside of the house was the same as ever, not a single bag packed up!"

That's enough already, Ohkawa chided his wife. Kazuko looked up at Ohkawa

dissatisfied. "Well I mean, isn't that just creepy? Really, I don't know what's happening in this village anymore...."

Part 5

Seeing her parents off, Shimizu Hiroko felt both dejected and relieved. Her parents from her birth family had both come to stay at the home for the memorial service. She knew that they went through the trouble of staying for three days because they were worried about Hiroko's own depression. But, on top of having lost her daughter, Hiroko was self-conscious of her own depleting will power. She shunned paying attention to her parents and at the same time shunned being paid attention to.

She opened the entryway as if unloading a burden from her shoulders, heading into the house only to see how empty it was. The electric lights were bright white. The village at night was dead quiet and the frail voices of insects sang of vestiges of fall.

With Megumi gone, there was a Megumi shaped emptiness in the house. While her parents were about, their presence glossed over that but with both of them gone, it was all the more exposed. Her father-in-law Tokurou and her husband too had lost their vitality since Megumi's death. The presence of people had faded from the house and there were many times when the sound of the TV echoed futilely. She had thought that emptiness suited her own mood, a reason why all the more she couldn't help thinking her parents presence was ill suited and yet when the two had gone the inside of the house was indeed lonely.

Hiroko sighed and went towards the living room. Her father and law and husband were both watching the surface of the TV without a word. Even if she joined in and made it three people, it probably wouldn't lead to it feeling like there were people gathered together there.

Hiroko went to sit without a word at the dining room table. Nobody said anything to Hiroko, and Hiroko said nothing to anybody. On the table was an open notebook with the costs of the service in them. She didn't want to do anything but if she didn't do something time would fail to pass. It was like being

a prisoner of time but even if she thought of ways to kill the time, that imprisonment wouldn't end.

Without a word Tokurou stood and left the living room. Hiroko and Shimizu both watched that, without asking where he was going or what he was doing. Without Tokurou, unable to bear the building silence, Hiroko opened her mouth.

"....What did you talk with the Junior Monk about?"

"Hm?"

"After the service, I was wondering what you were talking so deeply about."

Ah, Shimizu murmured. Before Megumi had gone missing did she seem to be acting weird in any way, did she go out anywhere from the latter half of July or in August or not. Had she ever gone to Yamairi, was she familiar with a man called Gotouda Something, if he'd ever heard anything like that.

Hiroko was silent to Shimizu's low answer, the conversation coming to an abrupt halt. While Shimizu too was silently trying to place his thoughts, he thought that he hadn't thought much himself about the answer.

He didn't think Megumi went to Yamairi. He didn't think she had known a man called Gotouda Shuuji. But he wasn't certain. What kind of man Gotouda was, Shimizu neither knew or asked but just maybe, he thought. ---In the dead Megumi's room was the lingering faint scent of perfume.

That scent that even now lingered faintly tormented Shimizu. It wasn't air fresher, it was perfume. Hiroko wasn't in the habit of wearing that on a daily basis. Shimizu had wondered about it at the time but the scent that lingered in the room was one that somebody her age might put on trying to put on airs for somebody, he murmured then. When Megumi had collapsed in the mountains, a few heartless neighbors intimated that what happened to her was obvious. Shimizu himself worried about it. Even if Toshio said not to worry about that, could he really believe the assurances of a doctor who said that it was just anemia?

Something probably happened to Megumi. Megumi had probably put on that

perfume for somebody. When had his daughter transformed into a "woman"? Shimizu had not only lost his daughter to death but had lost sight of her as well.

"....He asked some strange things."

At first for a moment Shimizu didn't know what the isolated words Hiroko had spoken were about, what they were in regards to--who they were even at. When he turned about absentmindedly, Hiroko was looking at him.

"....Aa....Yeah, he did."

"Who was this Gotouda person?"

"Who knows."

"Did that person perhaps do something with Megumi?"

"Something?"

"....I don't like it." Hiroko said without answering his question.

"Something...."

"Somehow, it's nothing but bad things happening lately."

"I guess so, huh...."

"Didn't the Ohtsuka Sawmill's son die? Just a while ago, Nakano-san's place seemed to be having a funeral too."

"That right."

"The people in Yamairi died, to.This year it's been nothing but such things. What's going on?"

"Isn't it your imagination?" Shimizu said but it came out more bluntly than necessary. The truth was Shimizu thought so too. This year was odd. He was seeing too many funerals around. He couldn't help feeling like something not good was happening in the village right now. But, when Shimizu said as much, his colleagues at work said he was over-thinking it. Maeda who also lived in Shimo-Sotoba lost a daughter, and she became neurotic, they chastised, seeming worried. That might be the case, Shimizu himself thought.

"It seems the Yasumori Obaa-chan's moved. Moved out to live with her son, I heard. ...Bit by bit it's like the popular's decreasing."

Is that right, Shimizu answered. It felt like they were being left behind in a lurch.

"Come to think of it, Nara-san from the JA retired, too."

"Nara-san? But, he was still...."

"Seems he was sick. It seemed like he planned to hurry into retirement."

"I see.... that might not be too bad."

"Even if you say that. For those of us left behind, it's unbearable. What with employees not coming to work and all."

"Employees? Who?"

Shimizu provided the name of a female clerk who transferred to Sotoba. She had been employed there a long time, so Hiroko knew of her.

"Her? She isn't coming in?"

"Mm," Shimizu frowned. "This is just between us but it seems she vanished without a trace."

My, Hiroko said aloud. "What about her husband and child?"

Shimizu shook his head with a sigh. Hiroko was shocked, and aware of just how much envy she felt. It wasn't a strong enough emotion to call envy but it was something similar.

--How good it would be to throw away the present, to flee away towards the future.

From the house oppressed by silence, from the family with a hole in it. From she herself who had lost her daughter. And.

(....From this cursed village.)

Part 6

Toshio received notice of Mizuguchi's Ohkawa Shigeru's death at the usual time, early in the morning. September 19th, Monday. By the time he had

hurried to the telephone, Shigeru had already died. Ohkawa Shigeru had been 33, one grade higher than Toshio, with 34 close at hand when he'd suddenly died.

Shigeru had been bedridden since three days prior, his breathing fizzling to a stop without anyone to care for him in the grey hours of the morning. When his family had come in the morning to try to wake him they finally noticed Shigeru was dead.

"To think that this could happen!" Shigeru's mother threw herself over the corpse sobbing. Toshio looked over that in irritation. Why, if he was ill, was he not made to go to the hospital, not brought into the hospital?

---Of course, he knew. Because it was over a weekend. It wasn't that Shigeru's parents weren't worried about their son. Nor were they indifferent to his health. Shigeru became far worse than his parents feared. At first, they couldn't think it was something to call the doctor out for on his day off. All the same, because they were worried for their son, they planned to bring him in first thing at the beginning of the week. And that wasn't soon enough. The illness did not give Shigeru until Monday.

It'd be better to open the hospital even on days off, Toshio knew. Those in the village were intimately familiar with Toshio. But that was why all the more they couldn't exploit him on his days off. There's no excuse for that, they thought, most considerably. They meant well--it was absolutely nothing but the best of intentions but for those patients braving this disease, the two days of the weekend, just those two days, were a fatal procrastination.

It wasn't just his patients. Toshio himself was inconvenienced by it. Every time he was called out for an examination it was of a corpse---and unable to even do an autopsy, he couldn't observe its progress or observe it, leaving him unable to determine the source of the disease. Anyway, saying that he needed to fill out a death certificate, he asked about Shigeru's medical history, both parents medical history, his habits past and present, pushing with all his might for who he'd seen recently, where he went, if there was anything there that could have infected him but nobody but the man himself could know all that. If he could at least ask Shigeru himself. While he was still lucid.

Lately the death reports had stopped. It was an incredibly short break. And then in came Shigeru's death notification. It was possible this was a beginning. After a small break ended the peak was coming. The coming wave would probably be greater than the last one.

It would be good to open the hospital on the weekend too. He knew that. All the same, if he did decide to open the hospital, he would need staff. It wasn't as if he could tell his already busy staff to work any harder, and they weren't exactly surrounded left and right by places to try and recruit new staff from.

Toshio looked down at the Ohkawa husband and wife crumpled and crying, in a dark, somber mood.

Seishin received notice of Ohkawa Shigeru's death also at the usual time right after the morning services. Returning to the office for a short break Seishin and the others heard the phone ring and looked to each other. That a phone call in the morning was not a good thing was something all of them had come to feel in their bones this summer.

The one to take the call was Mitsuo, the one to say "again" in a small mumble was Tsurumi. Nobody else said a word beyond that.

When he went to the Ohkawa household in Mizuguchi for the bedside sutras, there unfolded the usual pathetic scene.

"If I'd known that it would come to this, I would have drug him to the hospital on Saturday!" His mother Norie broke down sobbing. "It was because he said himself that he was okay!"

What happened with Fuki---when Gotouda Shuuji died, was repeating itself here. His father Choutarou and Norie both looked to have rounded and become smaller too. Shigeru wasn't yet married. Seishin didn't know whether he should say that the two having no daughter-in-law or grandchildren was fortunate or unfortunate.

For Ohkawa Choutarou and Norie, their son Shigeru's death was a disaster on par with their own deaths. It was a death so sudden they couldn't even imagine it in their dreams. The shock and significance was likely immeasurable to them, and yet to Seishin this was nothing more than another stereotypical scene he'd seen repeat so many times he felt nauseous this summer.

And so he found himself failing to ask indirectly about Ohkawa Shigeru's latest movements, too. Either way it there wasn't going to be any visible point of connection, he'd sensed from the beginning in his heart. ---And, practically speaking, he couldn't find any point of contact between Shigeru and the dead to now.

(Is this going to keep happening.... for how long?)

Wondering to himself in that dark and somber mood he'd fallen into, Seishin asked suddenly whether Shigeru had retired from work just before he died.

Norie made a face as if she didn't understand why she was being asked such a thing. "Of course not."

That's right, Seishin said with a wry internal smile. Yes, there was no significance to that. It was only something he'd noticed as an observer. As if not fully understanding his self-derisive silence, Norie piled on more words.

"He could not have. This morning, when we had notified his workplace in Mizobe, they didn't say anything about that."

"No, pardon me. It was just bothering me a bit, I am truly sorry to have troubled you over it."

Seishin apologized thusly and said that he would see them again at the all night vigil, then took his leave of the Ohkawa house. The next time he visited the Ohkawa house was a little before the all night vigil; sitting aside in the tatami room Seishin, as usual, listened to the grieved voices of condolence callers for the dead and the jumbled conversations passing through. Fixedly in wait through this, amongst the faces of the mourners he saw Ohkawa Tomio's face. Come to think of it the master of the Ohkawa Liquor shop didn't have strong blood relations with Ohkawa Shigeru but he remembered that there was some connection.

"Ah, it's the Junior Monk. You are workin' hard as usual. To think I'm meeting you at it today again after yesterday."

"It must be hard on you as well, Boss."

"That's two relatives now. Honestly, man." Ohkawa gave a sigh and with a bow of his head returned to his relatives. The main mourners, the Ohkawa

couple, sat deeply discouraged, receiving the visiting mourners.

"My condolences for your sudden loss." said a man in the prime of his life in a dark suit, behind him many likewise in mourning clothes in waiting. "When I had been told, I was surprised. I am sure that you must be depressed. If at tomorrow's funeral there is any way that I may be of service, please do not hesitate to ask."

To this Choutarou and Norie both nodded in silence.

"Thank you very much. ...Those of the neighborhood will do everything, so, your feelings alone are enough."

Is that so, the young man sighed. "Even so, it really was sudden. Was there anything the matter with Shigeru-kun?"

No, Norie said dabbing at her eyes with her handkerchief, shaking her head.

"Is that so?Ah, it's just, everyone," the man said turning back towards the number of people behind him. "had thought: Ah, Shigeki-kun probably quit suddenly for treatment or recuperation."

Norie's face lifted, the eyes she had been sobbing out blinking. Choutarou too suddenly started to stand as if pricked. Seishin too took another, more serious look at the man's face.

"Uhm... What might you be talking about?" Norie crushed the handkerchief in her hands. This time it was the man who blinked as if bewildered.

"No, uhm. Last week on Friday, Shigeru-kun took his retirement leave, and at that time he had said that it was for personal reasons but we were thinking that it was surely because he was sick and that he had quit in order to focus on recovery, we thought." The man said, looking at Choutarou and Norie's flabbergasted faces. "Uhm.... Did you not hear about it? He had quit, Shigeru-kun did. And very suddenly. He said that he had his reasons and that he was giving up any rights on inheriting anything and all of this and that, so he had to quit, by the end of the day and that was that." The man looked at the number of people behind him--colleagues, likely---as if seeking support. "He was very forceful, for Shigeru-kun, so we were saying he really must have had quite the circumstances, and then when we had received notice of his death, that must

have been it, we.... uhm, that is..."

"That---that can't," Norie was at a loss for words and then looked towards Seishin who was waiting his turn in the side tatami room. "That boy, he didn't say anything about---"

They looked at each other in bewilderment. Perhaps overhearing the conversation, the people around again exchanged looks.

Sinking down to the floor, Choutarou who had stood up was again seated. "I don't know anymore.... what's what. ---Why, such a thing."

And at such a loss for words, he began a fit of crying.

Seishin, still seated, felt as if he were thrown into the middle of an absurd play.

Shimizu Ryuuji, Hirosawa Takatoshi, and Ohkawa Shigeru. Each of them were young men who worked out of town. Who suddenly died. Dying was no longer odd, not in this village anymore. ----But.

Chapter 6

Part 1

It was on September 20th that Sotoba resident Katou Yoshihide came to the hospital, supported by his wife Sumie. An emergency case, Towada called. Toshio who was in the middle of examinations turned his eyes towards Yasuyo. Knowing his intent, Yasuyo stepped out into the waiting room where the old man, supported by his wife at one side and Mutou at the other, had at last been settled into a chair.

"Are you all right?" Yasuyo lowered herself to look into the old man's face. He looked faintly at Yasuyo and gave a nod, but it was a vague one, his color poor, shoulders heaving as he breathed. His breath was shallow and weak. When she took his hand, she could tell he was in a cold sweat. His pulse was also fast.

Ritsuko and Satoko turned around as Yasuyo came hurrying. "A stretcher. I'll let the doctor know, so carry him to the treatment room. Be sure to take his pulse and blood pressure. It might be best to prepare an artery catheter."

Yes, they responded, briskly heading off as Yasuyo returned to the examination room. Toshio asked how it was, looking up to her.

"He has been carried to the treatment room," she said, looking Toshio in the eye. It seemed that conveyed her meaning. Toshio excused himself from the patient and went towards the treatment room.

"What's his condition?"

"Tachycardia and tachypnea. There are some signs of cyanosis and his pupils are constricted."

Toshio nodded and entered the treatment room. "What's happened?"

When Toshio asked, Sumie wrung her sinewy hands together. "Two, maybe three days ago, he had caught a cold and was bedridden. He said himself that if he slept he would get better but today he's still like this---Junior Doctor, it

couldn't be pneumonia, could it?"

"I can't say anything yet."

Satoko presented him with a memo. There were many strokes of his pulse, his blood pressure extremely low.

"Artery catheter."

Yes, Ritsuko said presenting the catheter. Katou's wrist was already in place. Toshio nodded while speaking to Sumie.

"What's been his temperature?"

"Around 38 degrees."

"Cough of headache?"

"There has been no cough. And he didn't especially mention a... We really thought it was a cold. He had said so himself. That's why I had him take a decoction. My mother-in-law used to use that medicine whenever she had a cold, and no matter how bad it was it would be cured. And yet, he didn't even get a little better at all and..."

"Gas analysis," said Toshio, handing off the centrifuge tube and turning back to Sumio. "...What are you even thinking?"

Sumie looked at him blankly, eyes opened.

"Cyanosis is occurring. Why didn't you call an ambulance while you were bringing him over here? And on top of that you're telling me you thought it was probably a cold? When'd you become a doctor? Why the hell is an amateur just giving her own diagnosis and administering her own medicines!"

Doctor, Ritsuko said in a small voice. Toshio promptly glowered at Ritsuko, then immediately realized he'd lost himself.

"....No, I am so sorry."

Sumio was visibly dismayed.

"I'm sorry. Anyway, we will call an ambulance. Until then we will perform what minimal treatment we can, therefore."

"Uhm, is the old man that unwell?"

"I can't say without test results but it is certain he is having respiratory failure."

Probably ARDS, Toshio added in his thoughts. It was that. And the patient was in the latter half of it---it was already switching phases to MOF. Having Ritsuko prepare compressed oxygen, he gave instructions for a chest XP. For the time being he gave Sumie the standard questions.

Before he could get all of the results the ambulance arrived, and Yoshihide was taken to the national hospital.

"Sensei," Yasuyo began in a low voice watching the ambulance drive off. "It may be that, mightn't it?"

"....Probably, yeah."

Part 2

Before Higan, on the night of the 20th, Seishin paid a visit to Murasako Munehide in Sotoba. Murasako Munehide was the manager for the Sotoba community mourning crew. He therefore would have been the representative manager for the two consecutive funerals in Sotoba.

The lights were out in the enclosure of the shopping district that was the Murasako rice shop, the shutters already drawn down but, perhaps because he had called in advance, one of them was left half open. Bending down to open the glass door to enter the shop, Seishin called from the entryway.

There was an immediate answer, the one to pop his face out being the eldest son Munetaka. Munetaka showed a frank and honest smile.

"Yo. It's been a while, huh? What's up?"

It is the usual, Seishin answered as Munetaka ushered him inside.

"Business with my old man, then? He's waiting inside. Go on up."

Motioned to do so Seishin went from the store up towards the living area. Munetaka was three grades above Seishin. They had never been in the same

school but the second son of the family Hideki was one year above him. In high school he also came over to the Murasako rice shop to hang out often, and Munetaka had been good to him then. He often loaned him a lot of books and helped him with his studies. It'd been a while since he'd seen him or visited the shop, so it was nostalgic, seeing him again.

On the way to the tatami room, they passed by the side of the Japanese style living room. The one to bob her head down at him was Munetaka's wife, Chizuko. Chizuko had two children, a boy and a girl, seated at either side.

"Hiromi-kun and Chika-chan have grown, haven't they."

Haven't they? Munetaka laughed walking ahead of him down the corridor. "I guess the last time you saw her, Chika hadn't even started kindergarten yet, huh? She's a second grader already. Kids in the lower grades are amazing, you know. They grow right before your eyes and their personality starts coming out."

Just as he was answering, they do don't they, Seishin met the youngest son coming down from the second story. The third son was Masao. He was Munetaka's younger brother by more than ten years, so back when Seishin came, he was still a small child.

Masao looked to Seishin and averted his eyes. Whether he bowing to him in recognition or just hunching into himself, he passed by with a motion that didn't really seem to be one or the other.

"Masao, not going to say hello?" Munetaka called after him but he only fleetingly looked back and gave no response. He was getting to that age where they were reticent towards their family.

"He has gotten big. Is he already in highschool?"

"Second year," Munetaka said with a strained smile. "While his frame is getting bigger, he's not really growing at all. It's because mother and dad spoiled him, he's so hard to handle now."

It's natural, Munetaka said with an embarrassed seeming smile. "I get it ever since I became a father, your youngest child's just so precious and all. It's not like your older kids aren't precious but I guess you'd say they have something

more weak and protectable you'd call it? He was a kid who was born right around the time we were losing our cuteness and all, looking at it from their view, that's what made him so cute, thinking about it now."

"That may have been it."

"Yup," Munetaka nodded, putting his hand on the sliding screen door. "Dad, it's the Junior Monk."

"Aa, thanks for bringing him," Munehide said as he stood. It seemed he was in the middle of having an evening drink alone. His drink-reddened face was disheveled as he pushed to have a beer first, but he refused, saying he came by car. And yet all the more he urged the drink on him, until Munetaka scolded him, at which point he became amusingly sullen. Munehide was already around his 60th or so? When people got to that age, something about them became childish again.

He gave his thanks to Munetaka for leading him in, as well as to Chizuko for bringing in tea cakes. Once he was alone with Munehide, Seishin quietly broached the subject.

"...I had heard that Saeki Akira-san had died, but."

Munehide nodded with a dizzied face. "Right, right! He did die! Did the Junior Monk know him?"

"Not well enough that I could say that I do, but," Seishin said turning his eyes away with a guilty thought. He'd heard notice of his death through Ishida. Seishin didn't even know that a man named Saeki Akira existed at all. "I'd overheard it from others that it was a great surprise."

"Mm. It was sudden. No, but I guess I didn't know him that well either. His funeral group was Kami-Sotobas, so I didn't manage his funeral, so."

"Was he sick from long before?"

"Nope. Seems it was something sudden. In the middle of the night he suddenly said his stomach hurt---it seems it was actually his heart that was bad. There're times people've made that mistake, their heart hurting and thinking it's their stomach. His family didn't know that, so they tried giving him stomach medicine and seeing where it went but something seemed off. So they took him

to the hospital where it came out that it was his heart, and the next day he'd died." Munehide said, seeming to be brooding, somewhat. "The family was surprised but... Maybe it's possible he himself knew he'd had symptoms for a while now. He suddenly quit his job and all."

Seishin started. "You are saying that he had resigned?"

"Yup. Three days before he collapsed. He came back to the house and suddenly just spit out that he'd quit. His parents and his wife were, as expected, surprised. He didn't consult with them about nothing, they pressed on him and cross examined him but he said he'd already turned in his notice, and afterwards it exploded. It seems he said he wanted to take it easy for a while, wanted to rest, he was saying, I guess. So, his body might have been in bad shape after all."

Seishin was bewildered. The reason Seishin was visiting Munehide was because he wanted to know about Saeki's latest actions. Who he associated with, where he interacted, whether there was something in common with the other patients or not. At to that end, most questionings had been fruitless. Aside from cases when they were members of the same family, the fellow patients largely had no common point of contact. Nothing that could be definitively called it could be found. None the less, suddenly Shimizu Ryuuji, Hirosawa Takatoshi, Ohkawa Shigeru, three people other than Saeki had just before death abruptly resigned from their jobs. What could it mean that amongst all of them who had nothing in common, this was the single thing that could be called a commonality?

"Uhm, lately, there was another who had died too, hasn't there? In Sotoba."

"Aa," Munehide nodded. "Takami-san, right? Now that you mention it, that was sudden too, huh? Down to suddenly being bed ridden."

"That person didn't also.... he didn't quit his job, did he?"

Hidemasa blinked, making as if there were something strange in his mouth, a complicated expression. "That's right... Takami-san's place, too, were saying he had quit. He wasn't very committed to his job either, was he? There were problems at his wife's home family's place and he looked for a job, earnestly asked to move in, but I guess they couldn't take it after all and he quit, they

said. So it looks like he did quit. ---Right, that was also right before he died. They said it like it was just a few days before, at the service."

Seishin was panicked. The common point between the dead---resignation. The exceptions were Shuuji, Mikiyasu, Ohtsuka Yasuyuki, those who took part in independent businesses within Sotoba.

(...Those who commute out of the village.)

What could this be? There were two groups of victims, those who commuted from the village and those who didn't, and the commuter group had mostly quit their jobs just before death. ---No, Seishin thought. The only exception was Ohta Kenji but Ohta also turned in a letter of resignation. He was just dissuaded from leaving.

"What does it mean, all this?" Munehide made a bewildered face. "I'm just realizing it now but it's a funny story, now ain't it?"

Seishin nodded, vaguely. Hidemasa mumbled to himself.

"Somehow lately I'm getting a strange feeling. There're so many funerals and all...." Hidemasa said, then looked at Seishin. "The resident officer Takami-san died too. I'm getting the feeling it's an awful lot. Doesn't the Junior Monk think so too?"

"That.... may be the case. I suppose?"

"It's a lot. That's, this summer's been hot but is it enough for this many to die's the question, isn't it? It's not just in the Sotoba district either, lately I've been hearing there is or there was a funeral here or there, you know, from customers. ---You don't think." Hidemasa made a severe expression as he seemed to be peering into Seishin's face. "it's a plague, do you?"

"It couldn't be," Seishin said with a painful smile. "No one who has died has died of a plague, have they?"

"That's true enough, but."

"If it were an epidemic, the hospital would surely say as much. They couldn't not tell the families and depending on the case the families would be quarantined. Even if the families would keep it quiet, it it were on the death

certificate, the town hall wouldn't give permission for them to be buried."

"Aa," Hidemasa nodded as if still not satisfied. "Well, that's true, now."

"It is true that there are many dead, but..."

"It feels strange. Even though it's obvious there's no epidemic spreading, people are dying left and right. Two of those dead both quit with their companies and the like. It's been unusually hot and no rain. This year's strange... or maybe it'd be better to say it's the village, huh? This village is a little strange these days. Sudden move-ins and outs and all." Hidemasa said with a complicated smile. "Just around here two households have moved. Somehow, it's like we're being abandoned, now don't it?"

Come to think of it, Seishin had heard that some family from Monzen had moved. It seemed Ohsawa from the post office had also moved, the police substation's Takami's family had moved out and was gone. When he'd visited the Ohtsuka sawmill, he'd heard that---

Seishin tilted his head. Something was rising up that he couldn't satisfy in his chest, the feeling of something stopping up his throat. It was just like when Megumi and Gotouda Fuki had died, the vague sense of the abnormality that he had felt.

For the time being he asked Munehide the things that he could ask of him, then Seishin took his leave of the Murasako house. A bit uncertain, he stopped his car before the temple. Getting out of the car, Seishin peered into the Tamos' inner parlor. Entering through the back gate he'd never remembered everbeing closed, he went along the wall across the garden, towards Tamo Sadaichi's bedroom. In a quiet drawing room that faced the back yard, Sadaichi was indulging in his retirement.

"Sadaichi-san."

Called out to, the man who had an open book while facing a go board looked up. "Well, Junior Monk."

The Tamo household were typical part-time farmers. Sadaichi had been a grade school principal until the age of compulsory retirement, and his son was a teacher at Sotoba middle school. The farm land that made up for the cost of

food was tended to by Sadaichi's wife Kiyo as if it were a hobby but originally the Tamos were Sotoba's first or second richest farmers. Not only did they rent out excess farm and mountain land, they owned several of the rented shops in Sotoba's shopping district and several houses, and a few apartment buildings in Mizobe as well. By all rights with the rentals alone they could have lived a life of leisure but it didn't seem that the man himself, nor his family for that matter, had any intent to live that way.

"I am sorry for the late hour of the night. It is at last becoming cooler, isn't it?" said Seishin, to which Sadaichi smiled 'really!'

"Well, do come up. What is it?"

I had a small something I had wished to inquire about, Seishin said, and without asking further Sadaichi soon was in the kitchen attached to the inner parlor. From there he returned with tea he had brewed himself.

"Tea brewed by an old man may not suit your tastes but it's a bit much to call my wife in from the main wing. Either way, tea brewed by an old woman wouldn't be on much of a higher level, so you'll just have to forgive me."

Please do not fuss over me, Seishin laughed.

This old man laughing amicably was a current leader of Sotoba. Current day Sotoba had administrative wards that were called school districts; there were six of them---Yamairi was formerly one of them but in the present day it was amalgamated into Monzen--and in each a single named individual was elected to be the ward head. Then the six headmen were called the Ward Headman's Association and they elected a chairman, and this ward headman's association's headman was this man, Tamo Sadaichi. At the temple he served as the Parish Representative Committee's president, and on Sotoba's JA's board of directors. At the same time he was also the Shrine Parish Representative's head and the shrine's head priest. Sadaichi was that sort of old man.

"Somehow lately, there's been a hustle and a bustle, hasn't there? I guess it's been some time since I'd been able to meet with the Junior Monk face to face, now. How are things? At the temple."

"...Well thanks to you, thank you for asking," Seishin said while at the same time adding in. "Our Mitsuo-san had been saying that some place in Monzen

had had a move recently but, Sadaichi-san, might you perhaps know of which family it may have been?"

"Ah, the Matsuos, yes?" Sadaichi replied immediately. Leader of the village though he was, it wasn't as if every minute detail of the village reached his notice. Even so, if it was relating to Monzen, there was approximately nothing that did not reach Sadaichi's ears. "You know, Sakaimatsu. "

Ah, Seishin murmured. Sakaimatsu was Matsuo's trade name. Their estates were just on the border of Monzen and Kami-Sotoba, so they were called the Matsuos of the border, sakai.

"They have moved? Sakaimatsu?"

"That they did. Their boy was called Takashi, did the Junior Monk know of him? If I recall, he was a wee bit older than the Junior Monk, but..."

"Aa---Yes. I do know of him."

"That Takashi-kun went flying out of here saying that he was transferred away at his job but, that was an outright lie."

"...Ha?"

"I'm saying that he himself said he had been transferred when he left with his wife and kids but after that we never heard back like they were cut off. Sakaimatsu's Yasushi-san was worried and called to contact his company but far from being transferred, they said that he had quit."

Seishin was instantly startled.

"Without a word to his family, he went and quit. That's what they call absconding, and Yasushi-san was red with shame. He came to me for advice but he had said that things being what they were to please keep it a secret, so I've kept it quiet myself.

"About when might this have happened?"

"At the start of September. ---And then, it seems Takashi-kun did make contact. I don't know what lead to it turning out like this but at any rate he said he was going to his son's place and the family all moved out. That was just recently on the 18th."

"...That is a strange story, isn't it."

"Isn't it?" Sadaichi said adding hot water to the tea pot. "What's more, one day, there was a truck stopped out in front of the house, and when I asked the neighbor Morihiro-san's wife about it, that's how she answered. If the wife hadn't asked, did he plan to move without any goodbyes, then? Yasushi-san is a conscientious person but, he must have had quite the circumstances going on." Sadaichi refilled the tea cups, making a sullen face. "That's another story that happened at night. And then? Well, around the neighborhood, there's talk about how they might've been flying away by night, but. Perhaps Takashi-kun borrowed money from someplace scary, they said, and maybe he had to run away from that, they said."

Is that so, Seishin said looking into the face of the good natured old man that was Sadaichi. "Sadaichi-san, lately, have there not been any other households that have moved?"

Sadaichi looked at him blankly and murmured, let's see. "Come to think, at the end of August, the Kamiyasu's old woman moved, didn't she? Something about moving to start living with her son or something. I heard about something like that happening in Kami-Sotoba too. At Sadaji's place, his son-in-law said that, if I recall."

Sadaichi's younger brother Sadaji ran a super market in Kami-Sotoba

"...Looking at it like this, there are a lot aren't there? Recently." Sadaichi made a befuddled expression.

"It looks like it, doesn't it? I've heard how so many houses now have moved, just in Sotoba. And that's just lately. And so, Sadaichi-san, I am terribly sorry but since it has become an occasion on which I was able to meet with you, could I perhaps bother you to ask about indirectly how many have moved lately?"

"That's---I don't mind, but. What is this, is there something to it?"

"It is only something that is on my mind. I was thinking whether something was happening, so."

"Something?"

No, Seishin prevaricated, quickly faking the conversation in a new direction. "Uhm---wasn't it last summer, that the person from the research group had been coming to Sotoba frequently?"

Aa, Sadaichi nodded. "Now that you mention it, there was something like that. Building a resort facility or some such, he said. A golf ground or camp grounds, saying some kind of baloney, but hadn't that talk died out?"

"---Yes, I was but asking."

Hmm, Sadaichi folded his arms. "Certainly so. There are many coming and going, aren't there? I don't think it could be anything, but it certainly is interesting. I understand. I'll ask about indirectly."

"I am sorry, thank you very much."

Nodding, Sadaichi breathed a sigh. "What is going on, I wonder.Junior Monk, lately, do not you think it strange?"

Seishin was secretly in panic. "About... the movers?"

"There is that too. Somehow, I get the feeling there are many funerals. After good old Giichi, the wife at the contractors was next, wasn't she? Their boy passed on too, Mikiyasu-kun died too, the three generations of the contractors' family, even though they got along so good, are down to just Tokujirou and Setsuko-san all by themselves."

"Yes... that is true, isn't it?"

"The resident officer Takami-san died, too---come to think of it, the post office's Ohsawa-san moved too. Aa, and the library's Yuzuki-san also quit. Did you know that?"

Seishin blinked. "No. He has quit his job?"

"That's right, he has. It was another sudden story. It was already some time ago. Was it at the end of August, the start of September? Now Sumie-san who works at the nursery center is trying to learn to run the library, but."

Sadaichi lightly shook his head looking away. "Just the other day--about two days ago was it, the principal at the grade school quit too it seems. He'd had kidney failure, they were deciding whether to do dialysis or not, and that

became worse and worse, and he had to resign in the middle of the school year. This is like... people are coming out like an old person's worn out teeth, is what it feels like."

Seishin nodded while feeling a faint, vague apprehension. The village was mostly made up of people who conducted their business within the village but there were my no means no people like Yuzuki and like the grade school principal who commuted to work by coming into the village. There were more who went out from the village to work.

(...Commute.)

Ohta Kenji, Hirosawa Takatoshi, Shimizu Ryuuji, Ohkawa Shigeru, Saeki, Takashima. Each of them worked outside of the village and resigned before they died. Yuzuki, the grade school principal, as expected they who quit commuted from outside of the village.

(Gigorou-san.)

Ohkawa Gigorou went out of the village and when he came back he was sick.

What am I thinking, Seishin thought while lightly furrowing his brows. What is this. It's like---it was like something outside of the village was closing in around the village.

An epidemic was spreading within the village. That's how it should have been. And yet, why was it that like this it seemed there was something outside of the village?

----Oni.

(...Such a stupid thought.)

But, it was clear as a picture. The triangle like the tip of a harpoon. The forest of firs that enveloped the village. Surrounding the village from the outside, oni were peeking in on the village from here and there.

The village is surrounded by death.

Seishin took his leave of Sadaichi as if intoxicated by something, returned to the temple and called Ishida from the town hall.

"Ishida-san, I am sorry but I'd like the register of names for those who have

moved."

Ha, Ishida's bewildered voice sounded.

"A basic resident register or something along those lines, could you see if there is anything along those lines? ---I am depending on you."

Part 3

Friday, Toshio received word from the National Hospital in Mizobe that Katou Yoshihide whom he'd had transported in had died late last night.

Before lunch time, Gyouda Etsuko from Kami-Sotoba came in to the hospital. She too had apparent anemia. He prescribed iron supplements and vitamins, an antibiotic, and just in case a full blood transfer. It was a literal shot in the dark.

"Lately it's like the doctor has become totally high-string."

The one to say that over lunchbreak was Shiomi Yuki.

"It isn't like I don't understand though," Yasuyo was the one to say. "It's busy isn't it, lately. And without anything to show for it."

That's right, said Kiyomi nodding. She opened her catered and delivered lunch box and sighed. "It's because the essential patients aren't coming in until it gets bad."

"But, that the doctor would shout at the patients, I was surprised," Isaki Satoko added with her own sigh. "Ah, it's making me so nervous now, I'd thought then."

"Katou Yoshihide-san?That's right," Yasuyo nodded. "He was told that he was given a decoction because it was a cold... That'd just make him want to fall right over!"

"Is that how it is?" It was Towada who asked. Yasuyo shrugged her shoulders.

"The truth is there is no such illness as a cold. We say cold-like symptoms, these days. It's actually an upper respiratory inflammation. It's inflammation that occurs in the upper half of the respiratory tract. Cold air or allergies can stimulate an inflammation but most of the time it's viral inflammation isn't it? If

that's the case then no matter how much you drink of any medicine, it won't help."

"Heh."

"In the case of a cold, there's nothing you can do but recuperate. Eat, sleep, and build up your strength. What they call cold medicine is something to help with that. Since there isn't any particular medicine for attacking a cold, taking it shouldn't be enough to put your mind at ease. But, the elderly especially tend to think it's something that can be cured by taking something. They say 'one shot of this will do it!' Even though you won't get better no matter how much medicine you take if you don't recuperate."

"That's right," Towada said with a forced smile. "There are things like that in every family. Old family remedies, they call them."

"Right, right," Yasuyo laughed. "Cooking egg nog or garlic; those are, well, at least useful for warming the body up and raising your constitution, it's not useless, but some of them have ridiculous things in them! The 'old family remedy' is by no means the panacea it's expected to be. But they think that whether it's a cold or a stomachache, it can cure anything and everything, don't they! Then when you take off the lid and see what it is, it's medicine for women's ailments!"

The nurses crumbled into laughter.

"Well, as long as it's not made of anything harmful, it's medicine for the mind, which can be a good thing in itself. But, that's only if you also have proper recuperation. It wasn't something that was fine with just taking medicine and resting; whatever his state, she should have seen that it had gotten worse than the day before, should have made sure he was eating well, she should have seen the significance in that and noticed, you would normally notice something was strange before cyanosis occurs, wouldn't you? Ultimately, I think it must have been that attitude: 'if you take this medicine it will all be okay' and dropping your guard that did it."

"I see, that'd do it."

"Even so, it's no use yelling at the patients or their families. But, as far as his

feelings, I can't say I don't understand. Lately we've been so busy. On top of that, so many are dying off one after another like this, so isn't it all for nothing? If the patients at least cooperated and it was no good even with their help, we could move on, but."

"But really, they are increasing lately, aren't they? Not just the deaths but the patients."

Towada looked to Mutou. Mutou made a sullen face as he nodded. "In the end, everyone's uneasy. The number of deaths recently just isn't normal. It looks like it's becoming a rumor that there might be some kind of bad disease going around, so even if they'd normally sleep it off, they can't relax until they've been seen by the doctor, like, I guess."

"And on the other hand, we have the people who take a decoction and keep an eye on it."

"It's a tough one on all of us, this disease," Yasuyo brought her teacup to her mouth. "After all it looks like the ones affected go into a daze and don't make a big fuss. If the person complained that this hurts, if they answered how this or that was feeling, we know that it is what it is and don't need to worry. But, the person themselves doesn't seem to notice they're sick, do they? Thanks to that lately we've been able to tell by looking at their faces."

That's true, Kioymi nodded. "They look like it's somebody else's problem."

"Right, right. So we're depending on their families. People look but don't really see more often than you'd expect, even at their own family's faces."

"That's true."

"Do you think Gyouda Etsuko-san may have it, too?"

To Ritsuko's questions, Yasuyo nodded. "Probably, yes? She had that face."

Looming silence fell over the break room. For them the word 'it' meant a hopeless disease someone was presently suffering and couldn't be saved from.

"Kinda... scary, isn't it?" Yuki alone spoke, plunging them into a deeper silence. As they all let out a sigh, the phone rang. Ritsuko who was nearest answered it.

"Uhhh, this is Takano, but." The voice on the other end said. It was the part-timer Takano Fujyou. She had called first thing in the morning to say she would be taking the day off. "The doctor is out now, isn't he?"

"Right now he's with a patient. Shall I call him?"

"Aa... then, it's fine," Fujyou said, falteringly. "Uhm... Could you relay something to the doctor for me? ...I, was thinking that I'd like to be allowed to quit there, today."

"Fujyou-san?"

"I'm sorry, I really am sorry when you're busy. But, I just can't take it, being so scared, so afraid..."

Ritsuko had no words. Fujyou had always complained of her uneasiness. And, with the situation increasing in scale, she showed no signs of coming to ease.

"So many people one after another are dying! When I think that, why, I might be next, I..."

Ritsuko didn't have any words to offer in return. She could by no means blame Fujyou. Even if she tried to forget the sense of dread from being on the front lines, it wasn't something one could forget. If that was the case for Ritsuko and the nurses, then it must be all the more for Fujyou who came to clean and do odd jobs.

"The doctor says it's all right but the truth is he doesn't know if it's all right, does he? When I take out the garbage or some such, I think, what if a needle is sticking out, and my heart just races! So..."

".... Yes, ma'am."

"I'm so sorry."

"I will inform the doctor."

Please do, Fujyou said, hanging up the phone. Ritsuko hung up the phone and looked over all of the faces, which were giving her a dubious look.

"It was Fujyou-san. ...It seems she has quit. She's afraid, she says."

Kiyomi breathed a heavy sigh. "It can't really be helped, can it? We can't say

it'll be all right--that's an empty promise we can't really give."

Everyone nodded wordlessly. ---They could not do but nod.

Part 4

On Saturday Toshio drove his car towards Kami-Sotoba. Searching for Gyouda's house with a vague memory, his car drove onto their property. A dried up, wrinkly old man in front of the shed stood looking surprised. It was likely Etsuko's husband Bungo.

"Junior Doctor!"

"How is Etsuko-san's condition?" Toshio asked as he stepped out of the car. Gyouda nodded, his back hunched.

"Haa..." Gyouda answered seeming bewildered. "Thanks to you, today she seems good..."

"Good?" Toshio looked at Gyouda's face. "Is she sleeping right now?"

"Who knows... just a bit ago, she was cleaning up after lunch, but."

"So she's in a state where she can clean up," he said, to which Gyouda gave a leisurely nod. "I'm sure I told her to come first thing in the morning, but?"

Gyouda blinked as if he didn't know what he'd meant. "Uhm.... but, today you are closed."

"Yes. Saturday's a national holiday. But still she was told to come. You didn't hear that from Etsuko-san?"

"Haa...."

Leaving behind Gyouda who seemed to be nothing but bewildered, Toshio started on his own towards the entryway. Heading inside he called out, and shortly after Etsuko had come out, looking as if doing so were troublesome for her.

"Oh my, Junior Doctor..."

"No, not 'oh my.' Why did you not come even though you had an appointment made?"

"But," Etsuko said sitting on the raised door frame, blinking. "I feel well today."

"That's not what it's about. I had said let us look at how it progresses, did I not?"

If you do not come as you are supposed to, it is a problem for me."

"Yes. Uhm... Pardon me."

Toshio was irritated. While Gyouda and Etsuko showed no signs of any sense of impending danger at all, his own nerves were on edge. Enough to make him want to just tell them everything in one outburst. Etsuko had that very disease. Etsuko was without a doubt in an outbreak. And to day, none who had had an outbreak had been cured. Within a few days all of them were dead.

Rather than spitting out all of that, Toshio let out a sigh.

"-----And, you're feeling well, aren't you?"

Etsuko gave a seemingly slow, stupid like nod. It seemed she was still spaced out. Toshio sat himself down on the frame with her, holding his hand out to Etsuko. Taking her pulse it was indeed lower than yesterday. Her color was also better than yesterday.

Iron supplements, vitamins, and antibiotics had shown no effect to this point. If so, was the full blood transfusion what was working?

"Indeed, you are a little better. I'm taking blood."

"Haa....." Etsuko seemed indeed very unwilling in holding out her arm. He preemptively took the blood sample. With that done, Toshio tried to press upon her.

"It'd be better for you not to let your guard down. Even though you're more or less feeling good, don't decide for yourself that you're cured. Come in again tomorrow, all right?"

"But.... tomorrow is."

"It's fine. Tomorrow morning. If that's too much trouble then the afternoon's fine too. Either way, be sure to come. If you don't come, I'll be intruding again." Haa, Etsuko nodded. Gyouda who stood in the entryway watched the scene, dumbfounded.

Part 5

"Junior Monk," said Tamo Sadaichi coming to the temple just as Seishin was deep in his own room researching something. Sadaichi who had a long standing relationship with the temple came in as far as the office without particularly

bothering with calling out. He also frequently came across the yard to poke his face into the living room.

"Ah, good day. ---No, good evening, is it now?"

"Right now is good for you, isn't it? I'm sure you must be busy over Higan, and I know you must be eager to rest but, it's about yesterday's matter."

Seishin nodded and pulled out a seating cushion to offer to Sadaichi. Sadaichi wore a grimace as he settled into place.

"How was it?"

"How was it nothing. What's happening, here in this village. I tried asking here and there and, well, if I wasn't surprised. Probably since this number the number of houses that have moved are greater than twenty! The number of people are decreasing with a surprising vigor!"

As suspected, Seishin murmured in his mind. Sadaichi put out his notes.

"I've come with what I've heard so far but in actuality, there are many, many more, I do believe."

Seishin took the notepad and his eyes fell over the names recorded. A total of 22 households had moved. In the list were names Seishin had never recalled seeing before but many were parish families. Normally in this village, when someone of the parish changed residences, word would be given to the temple. None the less, even from those on the list who were parishioners he hadn't heard that they were moving.

"This many..."

"Just what's happening do you think? All the families suddenly moving out. About the old woman of Hasekura, do you know of her, Junior Monk?"

"Yes."

Hasekura Itoko was an old woman who lived alone in Kami-Sotoba who frequently came to morning services. Thinking back, he hadn't seen her face in some time.

"It seemed that she was saying she was going to live with her son and then

left, so it went, yes? But the old woman had a big fight with her son and his wife in the past. They originally did live together but the wife ran out and her son went away with her was how it went, wasn't it? Well, she may have made up with his wife, or perhaps things went sour between the son and his wife but if that were the case he would come back here. To say she'll be living with him, so suddenly."

Seishin nodded. The antagonism between Hasekura Itoko and the wife was rather famous. After all on the occasion of their fight, the wife had wielded a kitchen knife in her frenzy. That said, it wasn't that she had attacked Itoko; she had grabbed the knife and went running out screaming that she was going to die, so the story went, but it was nevertheless an incident that had been worth talking about within the village. After that the son took his wife and left the home and, angry over that, Itoko had mostly cut ties, he had heard.

"If she herself says so it must be the case but.... but, it is strange, isn't it?"

"Isn't it? Same as the Sakaimatsu case, it's an odd story. I was surprised when I heard it as well. Things like this do happen, I guess is how it goes."

"That is true...."

To begin with an old person living alone in the village had circumstances that went beyond being a matter of their wishes, and indeed she'd had a reason which was why she remained alone in the village. Of course if those circumstances changed living together became a possibility, which seemed to be the case but that it wasn't connected to the numbers moving out in such a short time was a bit hard to believe.

"Come to think of it, have you heard that the wife of the San'Yasu family ran away?"

"San'Yasu---do you mean Yasumori Seiichirou-san of Naka-Sotoba?"

Yes, Sadaichi nodded. "The wife is called Hinako you see and when they woke up in the morning, they say she wasn't there! That household too was like old woman Hasekura's, Maiko obaa-san and the wife didn't get along well either, so the bunch in Naka-Sotoba thought that it might turn out like it did at the Hasekuras' but it looks like it was the wife who threw out the husband and ran away."

"There is no chance that it was an accident or some such?"

"Doesn't seem to be. Not since they were all together when they went to bed. Even though they were sleeping beside each other, when they awoke in the morning the futon was like an empty shed skin, the wife nowhere to be seen in the home. In the middle of the night she gathered her luggage and left it looks like. This too was a surprising story."

"So it is..."

In the middle of the night, Seishin ruminated in his mind. It pulled terribly at his chest.

"Did Hasekura-san move in the night?"

"Can't say. It seems there were folks who had seen her say she was moving in with her son and gathering her bags but when she actually did move out it seems they don't right know. That old woman is just a little bit eccentric, so it seems there wasn't anybody too close with her. Her house is in the community of Kami-Sotoba, a little out of the way. It probably happened the next day or a few days later, I'd imagine."

Is that so, Seishin murmured. What was it, this somehow unconvinced feeling?

"Well, there are a lot of elderly living on their own. There are plenty of holdsholds like Kami-Sotoba's Shinoda where the parents and children live together too, but. More importantly, look here." Sadaichi bent forward to point on the note. "On top of Shita's Old Lady Yasumori, the Maebara's Setsu-san, and the old man from Inoda too. Naka-Sotoba's Mimura."

Seishin looked to Sadaichi, having difficulty following his meaning when Sadaichi nodded towards something. "With this, the real end of Yamairi is only natural, too."

"---Eh?"

"See, those Mimuras in Naka-Sotoba, they own the mountains under Yamairi, don't they? Just at the other side of the northern mountain. The old man worked hard to keep going into the mountains even now. That is until his son changed jobs, they said; the five in the family have moved now. Yasumori's

Misuzu-san owned all of the mountains of Yamairi itself. It looks like she's stopped working the mountains though. When the old man her husband died, it was quite the payment in kind. Maebara's Setsu-san owns the area with the woodland path, doesn't she? It seems Setsu-san too had stopped working the mountains but Maruyasu would come bit by bit to cut down the trees still. At the end of that woodland path is the mountain area owned by old Inoda-san. The old man still earned his bread in the mountains."

Seishin furrowed his brows.

"With this, there's basically nobody left who goes into the mountains. All that's left are the mountains either abandoned or used as payment in kind. The three from Yamairi have died too, with nobody coming and going, it's the same as if the place called Yamairi didn't exist anymore at all! --Well, that old man of the Inodas, he'd always said he'd be at it until he died but, after something like that happened, it'd feel unsettling, I'm sure he didn't feel like going into the mountains anymore. Lately, there've been a lot of wild dogs in the mountains too. Before, there was someone who'd been bitten and severely injured by being bitten by a wild dog, wasn't there? I wonder if that was finally the last straw for him to give it up?" Sadaichi said, breathing a deep sigh. "This too might be a sign of the times. Until now this village didn't feel too much like it was shrinking. Despite people saying depopulation, depopulation, in Sotoba, there were plenty of people left. I'd thought it was something special but I guess you can't buck the trends. But with that said, when people are dropping out one after another, how to put it, well, doesn't it feel more complicated?"

That is true, Seishin answered while having the feeling his understanding was growing dimmer. He couldn't put it into words well. Something he couldn't comprehend was right before his eyes, as if luring him into vertigo. The mounting number of deaths, dread of an illness, and the movers should have had some connection between them. None the less, it was as if people were synchronized in leaving the village. Whether they were dead or moving, different as they were, it made no difference in how much it decreased the resident population. He had the feeling it meant something but what meaning--what connection could he say there was? They couldn't have noticed the disease and been fleeing from it, their mobilization was too sudden for that.

Thinking as he saw Tamo off, Seishin came to a sudden realization and set out by car.

Anything and everything was failing to come together. It might not have been a bad idea to go back to where it all started to try to think it over fresh. Everything started in Yamairi. That was the only thing for certain. If he tried going to Yamairi, he might find something, he thought vaguely.

Feeling admittedly as if his mood were bringing on the clouds, driving towards Yamairi, Seishin couldn't help but be terrified all over again.

---The road, gone.

Part way along the cut out road to Yamairi, a landslide had occurred, a considerable span of the roadway stopped off. The road that Seishin had traveled not even two months ago at most had vanished. It must have been the rain some time ago. The brief rainfall was amazing but it wasn't exactly a rain bringing great blessings to the area's water supply. They had said that the dried slopes were caving in everywhere from the heavy rain.

Was Yamairi this isolated, he thought solemnly. Beyond the dirt and sand of the mountain, an uncounted number of small lights flickered. The lights like reflectors may have been the eyes of small animals. Or they may have been stray dogs.

Seishin clutched the steering wheel, his jaw set as he gazed at the earth and sand mountain. Of course that the road had disappeared was one, but that nobody had noticed that until now was also a shock. There was the fact that nobody had a need for it anymore. There was also the danger from the infestation of the wild dogs. ----But even so.

Yamairi really did die that day in the boundary. The inhabitants lost, and aside from wild dogs and small woodland animals, it had lost any who would visit. It vanished from people's consciousness and now existed nowhere but in people's memories. It really was like it had died out.

(If I don't report this....)

While thinking that he must report that the road had been blocked off to the town hall, he also thought whether or not that would even have any meaning if

he did. A road that had lost those who would travel it was another thing which had died out.

The village is surrounded by death.

Cultural Notes

Chapter 6 - 2

Sakaimatsu - The nickname for the Matsuo family who live in Monzen at the border of Kami-Sotoba. Sakai (境) means border, Matsu (松) is short for Matsuo (松尾), a last name common enough there are likely multiple families with the last name in any given area.

Chapter 7

Part 1

Toshio remained seated in his waiting room, glaring at the clock with growing irritation. Once it was past three, unable to bare it he picked up the phone. He called the Gyouda house. Even though he'd said as much as he did Gyouda Etsuko wasn't coming. Today was Sunday. The hospital wasn't fundamentally open. Gyouda Etsuko was surely well aware of that but this was no time for letting that get to her.

The ringer rang six times. Just as he was thinking of hanging up and trying to go there in person, at last someone picked up. The one to pick up was Gyouda Bungo.

"Ah... Junior Doctor." Gyouda piped in a dismayed voice.

"Well, Etsuko-san hasn't come yet, has she? Did something happen?"

"No," Gyouda hesitated to say, from there speaking timidly. "Uhm, no matter what it may be, we couldn't impose on a Sunday. She herself said she felt guilty, so if you could have her come in on Monday..."

Toshio breathed a sigh. "Gyouda-san, I'm not trying to scare you but it'd be better to keep an eye on that disease of Etsuko-san's. I can't say anything for sure yet but there's a possibility of it getting worse like that. If that happens, with Etsuko-san at her age and all, I could even see it taking a turn for the worst. Even if it is Sunday, I'm telling you to come."

"Haa..."

"If you don't care whether Etsuko-san lives or dies, then fine. If Etsuko-san's fine with that, then do what you want. But, if you're worried about your wife, then during the time you have free to worry, could you not bring her here?"

"But..."

"I'm the one telling you to come to me. I've been waiting here at the hospital

to close since this morning. Maybe you're trying to be considerate to me, and I'm thankful for that but if you're going to be considerate towards me all the same, then coming right here first thing in the morning and setting me free early is a lot more helpful, wouldn't you say?"

I'm sorry, Gyouda said, I'll bring Etsuko there now, he said. Toshio breathed a sigh and hung up the phone, and then felt a tinge of self loathing.

Doctors had no right to order their patients to come. That had to be left to the patient's will. Toshio was the vanguard of the villager's health but it wasn't as if he bore the duty of supervising it, and he by no means the authority to do so effectively. He was irritated with himself for ignoring that and unsparingly ordering her to come. And he was irritated with Gyouda for letting him. And most irritating of all was thinking that giving an order and behaving like this was painfully reminiscent of his father.

Spouting that he was the vanguard of the villager's health, his father behaved as if he saw anything that would bring harm to the villagers in such a way as a personal affront. Injured patients he attacked as careless, sick patients he attacked as neglecting their health and their families as being careless.

Toshio clicked his tongue. His own behavior was just like that of his father's. That was so unpleasant he couldn't stand it.

(I've got to cool down....)

It couldn't be helped that the villagers weren't carrying any sense of dread. Toshio himself was the one who was hushing up the situation so as not to stir up any useless sense of crisis. If he spit out the situation frankly, Gyouda too would be afraid. To be suppressing that while blaming Gyouda was not coherent reasoning.

While persuading himself of that, a voice called out 'excuse me'. Toshio stood with mild agitation. He was all the more aggravated at himself for thinking that there was an interphone, and how could he not see it.

When he went to look as expected it was Gyouda, and Etsuko's condition had worsened. Clearly it wasn't as good as it had been yesterday. At that, Toshio's sense of self reproach swelled further at having called her in. Gyouda's feet were unsteady. If this was how it was when she went out walking, Toshio

should have been the one to go. That made Toshio once again displeased. If she was getting worse after all, why didn't he say as much; and so the target of his anger switched to Gyouda, his irritation getting out of hand. --In truth, Toshio was aware himself that he didn't have control of his own emotions.

Somehow, he managed to let it pass without saying anything, that Etsuko's condition had worsened. For the time being he took a blood and urine sample. Her urine was a dark color, and on top of being dark there wasn't much. Her breathing was mixed with light wheezing. Once again, he did a full blood transfusion. No other medical treatment that appeared to be effective had arisen.

If her condition gets earnestly worse, he ordered for them to call call him and an ambulance. But, as Toshio himself said that, he didn't naively imagine that Etsuko would be saved or any such by it.

Part 2

When Kaori opened her eyes, it was already close to noon. As she opened the curtain and the window, an Autumn tinted breeze passed through. The temperature was still a far throw from being called cool but the skies seemed higher. Something about the wind felt sharper.

September 25th. It was near the end of September. And seven days from Megumi's 35th day memorial service. Her 6th 7th day service would be on the 42nd day.

Kaori changed her clothes and made an effort to look like she was eating breakfast as Sachiko scolded her for eating slowly.

"Even on Sunday you're not of a mind to help around the hose?" Sachiko scowled at Kaori.

"You're always dragging your feet. Aren't you just using Megumi-chan's death as an excuse to laze about? Just cut it out already!"

That isn't the case, she thought, but Kaori couldn't get the words out. In the end, Megumi's death wasn't anything grave at all according to Sachiko. She pushed for her to hurry up and clear it away, why she blamed Kaori for never clearing it away.

With some half hearted response to Sachiko's fault finding she returned to her room.

"....But, I won't forget."

Kaori murmured to herself as she sat on the window.

Megumi was her childhood friend. Her best friend. Kaori loved Megumi, so no matter what the adults around her might have tried to say, she wouldn't clear Megumi away. As she'd always remember her, she'd always be sad. She was grieving Megumi's death.

Though she thought that, lately Kaori became aware of a part of herself that seemed as if it were forgetting Megumi's death when not thinking about it. Directly after Megumi's death, everything she looked at made her remember Megumi, she always thought 'if Megumi were here.' Even though just remembering Megumi left her unable to stop her tears from flowing, now unless she remembered Megumi with all her might, the tears wouldn't come.

(....I don't want to.)

She didn't want to clear away and forget Megumi. She didn't want to become like that. Thinking that, she decided to try to cry for Megumi's sake to confirm that part of herself just a little, but that was becoming more difficult.

Kaori bit her lip and pulled Megumi's post card out from her drawer. The carefully written Late Summer Greeting Card, the characters written by the Megumi of her memories.

(....So carefully written.)

Putting her heart into it, and yet she couldn't send it. How much must she regret it?

Hearing that Megumi had died, she rushed to the house but nothing clicked. Kaori who had been in a daze hadn't cried at last until the moment she'd found

this post card. When she thought that she had writetn it so carefully, that alone made her tears flow without stopping them. The thirty fifth day was the same. Now she was sad. It was pitiful she thought. Yet why wouldn't the tears come?

Whole heartedly, once again, she turned it about in her heart. If she didn't bite into herself and instruct herself to force it the tears wouldn't come. ---She couldn't feel sad enough for tears to come forth.

(I don't want this.)

To think her sadness had been worn down in only 42 days. That shouldn't have been all right, she earnestly told herself, but the sentiment that rose so high as to once overwhelm her before were no longer coming.

Far from it, looking at the post card like this, a different type of guilt arose. She spastically took it out of Megumi's room on a whim but was this the right thing to do? At the time she'd thought she had to but as time lapsed she didn't understand why she did such a thing. She remembered being flustered that they were going to clear away Megumi's room, weren't they? Traces of Megumi would be wiped away. Before that, even just one thing would be fine, she had to save some vestige of her but if she thought about it it wasn't necessarily true that Megumi's room would be sorted away.

Her doubts about what she had done may have been because of the conversation with her teacher right after that.

Coincidentally, Kaori was on class duty. Asked to help the English teacher with printouts, she went to the copy room with another student.

"Tanaka-san, you seem less cheerful lately," said that professor---Hirosawa. "Like there's something bothering you."

The one who had said that her friend had died was the other one on duty, Koike Touko. This was the first she'd heard of it but Hirosawa and Megumi's father appared to be friends. She thought she had seen Hirosawa's face at the funeral but she didn't think they had such a connection. It was from that Hirosawa that she'd heard that Megumi's father was incredibly shut down inhis depression. Megumi had the feeling she was saved in some small way by that. She had thought then that not everybody had cleared Megumi away, had wanted to clear her away, and as she stood there at last she realized that

Megumi's parents were suffering more than herself without a doubt, she had realized such a natural thing. She had been feeling as if there were nobody in the world more sad over Megumi's death than herself and yet she had come to realize that that had been incredibly arrogant of her.

Even so, so Kaori thought. In that case, they could have at least let Megumi be in the home until the 49th, without pushing up the end of mourning. Since Hirosawa only tilted his head, Kaori told him that she'd thought of the Memorial services as similar to an exorcism.

"Aa... I see." Hirosawa's smile had a complicated feeling. "So, Tanaka-san felt like Megumi-chan was being driven out of the house."

But, said Hirosawa said to the nodding Kaori. "That's a bit of a misunderstanding."

"....Misunderstanding?"

"Mm. When a person dies, for 49 days, they're trapped in the border between this world and that one. Well, we say it's the border but since we don't well know where it is, we speak as if they're in the family altar at the time. Even while you could say that's in the home, indeed it is something that is situated in the home, they've died and are no longer in this world anymore, but they can't yet go to that world. In other words, their destination hasn't been decided yet."

"Destination?"

"Right. You've not heard of the circle of transmigration, have you? People transmigrate through six worlds, you see. They die and are reborn, cycling round and round. The dead person's next life is decided based on how they lived their former one. Every seven days a trial is held about that, you see." Hirosawa said with a gentle smile. "The point is, they're drawn out before Enma-sama so it's said. Every seven days they're called out and an investigation occurs. If they were bad in their previous lives, they'll fall into a so-called hell but if their prior life's doings were good, they go to the Pure Land. In cases where they're not quite good enough to go to the Pure Land, they are reborn as a human once again to redo their learnings."

"As a human....?"

"Right. Since it's reincarnation through the six realms, it's called the endless transmigration of the six realms. There are six worlds: Hell, Preta, Beast, Asura, Human and Heaven. So a memorial service, you see? It's undertaken to plead that they can get even just a little better judgement, to quickly put an end to it and to please let them go on to the Pure land."

Kaori gave a dazed nod. When she looked to Koike Touko, Touko's face looked as if she'd known about it well.

"Touko-chan, you knew?"

"Mm. My grandpa's a mourning crew mediator after all! I've been hearing all about that stuff since I was little."

Hirosawa smiled. "If a conclusion isn't reached in 49 days, it seems it's carried out after 100 days, on the first anniversary of their death, and the third anniversary of their death. Staying in the boundary for too long---in bardo, chuin or chiin, isn't by any means a good thing. Of course, for the deceased it's good to quickly get a good verdict. So, that's why the family holds the memorial services, praying that the deceased receives divine protection for a quick and good verdict, offering up readings of Buddhist scriptures in the dead's place, offering alms to add to the dead's favor and good will."

Is that how it was, Kaori thought, feeling as if a demon had been exorcised from her. Nobody--least of all Megumi's parents--were trying to drive Megumi out. They weren't trying to forget her or to clear her away.

When she understood that, her own actions were stupid, rash, she thought. Why did she feel so much even now like Megumi's room was going to be lost. She had thought that everything Megumi treasured was going to be perfunctorily thrown out, but, was that really something Megumi's family would have done?

When she thought of that, she was ashamed of what she had done. Even so, Megumi wouldn't have wanted her parents to see this post card. That alone saved her. That said, Megumi probably didn't want Kaori to have ownership of it like this either. Thinking as if it were herself---she'd want it either sent to the given address, or if not that, then she had a feeling she'd want it disposed of where nobody would see it.

(What should I do...)

Since that day Kaori had thought about what she should do countless times while looking at the postcard. Of course she couldn't return it to Megumi's parents now, and she had the feeling that wasn't what she should do. Should she try to return it to where it was? But, what could she say to be let into Megumi's room? Would it be better if she disposed of it in Megumi's place? Or--
-.

Kaori gazed at the recipient's name.

The late summer greeting card she wrote for him. She only wrote it, Megumi died without being able to send it. Even though she wrote it so carefully.

(Megumi... you wanted to send this, didn't you?)

She tried murmuring that more firmly in her heart but indeed the tears wouldn't come anymore.

But it was probably certain she had wanted to send it. That was why Megumi wrote it. That was the very reason that she had thought to try to give it to the recipient at the funeral. But the person himself said he didn't want it.

(You loved that terrible of a person?)

He wasn't even the slightest bit sad about Megumi's death. Even though Megumi put so much thought into it, so that she wanted to give it to him, far from being happy about it, Natsuno seemed incredibly burdened.

(I'm not exactly close with Shimizu, he said... Even though Megumi liked him that much.)

It was unforgivable of Natsuno to treat Megumi's feelings, of Megumi's death so lightly.

Kaori continued to gaze, fixated on the post card.

---Send it. He has an obligation to accept this.

That's good, Kaori thought as she stood. It was better than her having it, better than disposing of it. Megumi herself probably wanted to send it and all, and even Natsuno might have realized Megumi's feelings if he saw it. He might understand how terrible a thing he said.

Kaori went downstairs. Her mother was trying to voice more complaints to her but without paying it any mind she went outside. Jogging down the path she had gone down and gotten used to so many times she came beside Megumi's house. The post office was right next to Megumi's house.

(Even though it's only this far.)

Megumi was sick enough that she couldn't walk this distance. Suddenly, she had gotten worse, and then finally....

Kaori took one last look at the face of the post card. She hesitated a bit on putting that in the post box. She had thought that she wanted things to be easier on her by doing this.

It wasn't as if she couldn't handle it. Megumi wanted this, so she would do it in her place. She had some difficulty convincing herself of this. What made the postcard drop from her fingertips was a voice calling out from behind her.

"---Kaori?"

It was Akira's voice. Surprised, Kaori released the postcard and it fell into the bottom of the post box. Making as if to follow after it, Akira poked his face in from Kaori's side.

"Aaaah. Why're you sending out a late summer greeting card now? You do know it's September now?"

Startled, Kaori gazed at Akira's face. "No. ... You saw?"

"I could see it. You were staaaanding in front of the post box, so when I was looking and wondering what you were doing..." Akira said giving a forced sigh. "I didn't know Kaori had this little common sense."

"Isn't it fine? It's still hot," Kaori struggled to make an excuse as she turned back. "And a midsummer greeting is only good until Obon but there's no cut off for a late summer greeting card."

"I think I'm gonna cry, having an older sister who doesn't even know something as basic as this."

Kaori turned back towards her little brother Akira who was following her.

"What's that?"

"Even late summer greeting cards have a seasonal cut off. September's about over, you're really pushing it. And a midsummer greeting's not until Bon. It's the first day of Autumn. Man, it's just embarrassing."

Kaori blinked. "You're kidding aren't you?"

"I'm not kidding. It's until the first day of Autumn."

"...When's the first day of Autumn?"

"I don't know. But it's towards the beginning of August. It's before Bon, I know."

"But," Kaori murmured. "Megumi said so. That it's until Obon...."

Akira looked at her blankly. "Megumiii?"

"Right. I don't know when, but Megumi said so. So I always thought that was..."

Akira sighed. "Megumi didn't know what she was talking about, but she was brimming with confidence about that, wasn't she?"

Is that how it was, Kaori thought. If it was past the first of Autumn then a late summer greeting card was fine. If Megumi knew that, she could have probably sent it out herself.

Thinking that, Kaori's feet stopped. She turned back around towards the post box. The post that right now held an out of season post card. The four cornered red post box. Right around the corner from that was Megumi's house.

Megumi couldn't send it. Even though the post box was that close. As for why, that was because Megumi thought that a late summer greeting was after Bon. And yet over Obon she had gotten sick and been bedridden.

(But, if she was that sick that she couldn't even walk that little bit of a distance....)

"Megumi... When did she write that..."

Hearing her talk to herself, Akira tilted his head. "What? Megumi wrote that?"

Oh no, she thought too late. Kaori gave an unwilling nod. "It's a secret. ...Megumi left it behind. So, even if it's out of season, I thought I'd send it for

her."

"Heh."

"Megumi thought that a late summer greeting was from the thirteenth I think. But, on the thirteenth she was sick. No, she was already bad by the eleventh. Since she collapsed in the mountains."

"Then, she must've written it before that."

"If it was before that, it would be a midsummer greeting wouldn't it? That's what Megumi thought!"

"That right? Then, she pushed herself to write it even when she was sick."

"That's... what it would have to be, wouldn't it?" Megumi wrote the post card after getting sick. She could only think as much. But something was pulling at her. Something was weird.

Kaori stopped, her head tilting, when she realized that she had come up beside the Ohtsuka Sawmill. Looking at the piled heaps of lumber, she suddenly thought.

"Megumi... when did she meet the Kirishiki's wife?"

"Haa?"

"I saw the wife. On the thirteenth."

"You said something like that, yeah."

"Mm. It was when I was going to pay Megumi a get well visit. I told Megumi too. That she was pretty. And then Megumi said that she knew."

"Knew? Then, Megumi met her before too."

"Right? But, when I saw her at the bottom of the hill on the tenth, she didn't seem like she had. I mean, Megumi didn't know what kind of people were in the family. When I said there wer rumors there was a wife and a daughter, she looked like it was the first she'd heard of it."

Akira tilted his head. "Uhhh, then? It'd have to be on the eleventh, huh? Ain't

that the day Megumi went missing?"

"Right. We parted at the bottom of the hill. Megumi went up the hill."

"And then, like, she was found in the middle of the night, wasn't she? She was sick and collapsed in the mountains. Since then she'd been bedridden."

"That's right! If she had been out walking around on the twelfth or the thirteenth, Megumi would have sent the post card. If she'd sent it on the twelfth, it'd arrive on the thirteenth or later."

"In other words, she didn't leave the house on the twelfth or the thirteenth is what it comes down to then, huh? Then she couldn't have met the Kanemasa's wife, it had to be the eleventh. That's the only thing I can think of. She went up the hill and met the wife there."

"But," Kaori murmured. "It became such a big deal? They combed the mountains, and the young man from Kanemasa came out to help. Nobody knew where Megumi had gone, I was the last one to see her, at the bottom of the hill. If the Kanemasa people had seen her, wouldn't they say so?"

Akira tilted his head. "Even though they saw her, they didn't say anything...."

"But, why?"

---Maybe something happened.

Kaori's mother had said this.

----A girl out until that hour! When she came back, she was acting strange, didn't they say? Something happened, I'm sure of it. You be careful, too, Kaori. There are all kinds of weirdos out in the summer.

(Something really might have happened...)

Kaori lifted her face and looked towards the western mountain. From where Kaori was standing now, she could only see a mountain of firs.

(At the top of that hill, something)

Something happened to make Megumi sick. Something that would be a problem to them if others knew about it.

"Hey.... Kaori," Akira said with an unusually serious voice. "Lately, don't you

think there are a whole lot of dead people?"

Kaori tilted her head. "I do, but."

"And that's been since Kanemasa moved in hasn't it?"

She stared blankly. Was that right? She wasn't sure but she was sure there were some before.

"But still, Megumi suddenly got sick and died, and right before she got sick, like, she climbed Kanemasa, didn't she? Probably while there she met the wife."

"Y, yeah."

"And you, you met her on the thirteenth, the Kirishiki's wife. That was when she was with Yasuyuki Nii-chan, didn't you say?"

Kaori gasped in a breath.

That was right. She was with the Ohtsuka Sawmill's Yasuyuki. And----.

"Yasuyuki Nii-chan is dead too, isn't he."

Kaori couldn't move. Yes, it was right around here. In the lumberyard, Yasuyuki was explaining something or other to Chizuru. Suddenly Yasuyuki's health failed and he died.

"Megumi must have met the wife. But, nobody at Kanemasa said anything about---"

"Hey... Let's stop."

"Kaori?"

"I'm getting scared. Let's stop talking about that."

Akira called after her, but she shook her head. She ran from that place and hurried towards the house.

Part 3

"Huh, it's another move." Natsuno stopped.

"Hn?" Said Tohru who came out to buy his usual cigarettes, stopping. "Ah, really."

Just coming out of the Mutous house was a harvested field and across that field could be seen a truck easing in around a row of houses. Natsuno checked his wrist watch immediately.

In coming home from school, he came back together off of the bus with Tamotsu. Since then he'd stayed close with Tamotsu going back to the Mutou's house, being fed dinner by them before going back to his own house. Just when he was thinking of leaving, Tohru's father had returned. It seemed lately the hospital was busy, with Mutou returning so late. Not just late, it seemed he was bringing work home too. He'd even caught sight of their mother Shizuko helping with it. He worked this late, he thought looking at his wrist watch and it was already ten o'clock. Just as he thought, the hand on his watch was passing eleven. No matter how you thought about it it was a late hour to be moving.

"Takasago movers again." Natsuno said to himself, making Tohru tilt his head.

"Again?"

"Just last time there was a move at a weird hour wasn't there? That was Takasago movers too."

"Did something like that happen?"

"Are you already going senile, you old fart?" Sighing deliberately to be heard, Tohru's fist came flying out at him. Laughing at that, he dodged, separating from Tohru. While heading on the night road to his house, he'd thought that something was off.

The summer of continuing deaths. When that about ended, now it was movings being sighted. No, maybe nothing had ended. Mutou's returning home so late the sun had set was proof of that. Anyway, it's busy, Mutou grumbled. Bust meant that there were just that many patients, that the number of people who were sick was increasing. Actually, he'd also seen a lot of funerals. He didn't know who all they were for but it was indeed proof people were dying.

This was what happened when the village was exposed to depopulation. A lot

of moves. ---But, he couldn't make sense of the fact that those moves were all separately at night. And then there was the fact that they were all with the same moving company, what was that?

He returned home feeling unsatisfied. As he came in to the entryway and took off his shoes, his mother poked her face in bitterly, looking as if she were fresh from the bath.

"Welcome back. The Mutous' again?"

"Yeah."

"Again and again, being treated to dinner over there. They're in the neighborhood so can't you at least come back for dinner?"

Yeah, he gave as a half hearted answer.

"Or at least if you came home once then went back out? Honestly, which family do you live with!"

Which family nothing, Natsuno murmured in his heart. This wasn't a "family." They were the ones who refused to take on the form of a married couple, refusing to be a family in the first place, weren't they, he thought. This was nothing more than a place where two adults, a man and a woman, gathered together with a child. He didn't plan to criticize his parents way of life but he was disconcerted by the way they declined the obvious while at the same time being indifferent to the way they themselves demanded the obvious.

Without looking at his mother giving idle complaints, once he tried to return to his room she called out to stop him.

"Hey, a post card came for you." His mother pointed above the shoe rack.

"For me?" Natsuno took the post card in hand. "---What is this?"

It was a late summer greeting. Passing his eyes over the writing, once he knew it was Megumi, his brows furrowed.

"Sending a late summer greeting now, that's weird, isn't it? Who is she, this Shimizu-san girl."

"Don't read other people's postcards."

"Oh my, but since it's a post card it can't be helped can it?"

He stared at his mother coolly then lowered his eyes to the postcard.

---Shimizu Megumi.

"Isn't it from Shimizu-san's daughter? That."

"....Probably."

"That's not good. Why is a post card coming now? It's creepy."

"Probably somebody's prank," he said heading directly to his room. He turned on the light in his room and looked again at the postcard.

Without a doubt, this is that "Shimizu Megumi," he thought. But, Megumi died in the middle of August. There was no reason for the dead to send him a post card, and no matter how he thought about it, it was too late for a late summer greeting card. Megumi might have written it before she died. And some kind of accident happened that least it it being delivered now, then?

Somehow it still felt like something was going unaccounted for but he didn't think he needed to force himself to feel creeped out. Natsuno moved to throw it into the trash----for some reason, though, he stopped.

He didn't plan to hold onto it and treasure it dearly. But, there was no reason he had to throw it away or whatever today, he thought.

Tohru bent down to the vending machine and took out his pack of cigarettes. Pocketing the change, he turned around. While walking along the night road, something felt off, he thought.

There were a lot of funerals, a lot of moves. ---Definitely a lot, he thought. There had never been this many before. He didn't want to jump to the conclusion that something that had never happened before happening was weird but he couldn't come to a satisfactory conclusion. Lately, something was strange in the village, he couldn't help but feeling. Like something was out of tune, like the wheels were turning without getting anywhere, like things had deviated terribly from where they should have been.

Unthinkingly tossing his cigarette pack in the air, he caught it as it came back down. It then jumped from the palm of his hand onto the road surface,

rebounding and tumbling. It tumbled before a young man. The man picked it up.

"Ah, sorry."

"No. Here."

He didn't recognize the face of the man handing it over. He was probably a few years older than Tohru. It wasn't as if he knew all of the villagers by any means but he did indeed know those of his own generation. If it wasn't somebody he recognized, he could only think he was someone from Kanemasa.

"By chance are you from Kanemasa?"

That's right, the other smiled. "This's the first time I've met someone the same age as me. I am called Tatsumi. Good to meet you."

"Hello, good to meet you too. I'm Mutou."

"I had thought there wasn't anybody around my age in the village."

"That isn't the case. There aren't many, so the odds of encountering them are low, I'd think, though."

While answering, he thought, this is him. He was probably the rumored "young one from Kanemasa." The one who appeared at Masao's place.

"---Are you out for a walk?"

"I'm not out for a walk persay, more like loitering. It's boring inside the house but there's no place to go. I wonder what the young people in the village do to pass the time every day..." Tatsumi said, Tohru smiling.

"In the village, there's not much to do besides watch TV and sleep. Eating's about it. If you want to do anything more substantial while hanging out, there's nothing to do but go out of the village."

Tatsumi blinked. "Then, there is no choice but to go to Mizobe as expected. By car?"

"Yup."

"But, if you go out by car, you cannot go drinking, can you?"

"Well, that's what it'd be at face value."

Tatsumi sighed. "I think that it is a nice place, but as expected with no place to go, there's too much time on your hands." Saying this, Tatsumi laughed. "That said, if I walk out in the daytime, I get the feeling I've become a rare beast!"

Tohru laughed. "If you don't have someone to hang out with, there's nothing at all, in this village. That said, even if you take the trouble of going all the way out to Mizobe, I don't think there's any place you could pass the time having that much for yourself, but. Especially at night, yeah? If you go out to Mizobe, the night still ends early there too. Well, unlike the city, that's just how it is here."

"That's how it is."

"There's no major place to hang out but, even so if you like, next time, I could show you around."

"Really?"

"If you like, give me a yell on the weekend. I live in Naka-Sotoba. If you ask for the house of Mutou who works in the hospital office, they'll know right away."

"Ah---you work at the Ozaki Clinic."

"My old man does. I'm just a simple office worker, myself. It's a loud and busy house where it's hard to unwind but, if you want, come on by sometime."

Thank you, Tatsumi smiled. He looked at Tohru as if with some implication.

"I'm glad you offered. ---I will definitely visit you. Until then, best regards."

Part 4

On the 28th, the end of Higan during which he couldn't tear himself from the constant memorial services, Seishin visited the household commonly known as San'Yasu---the Yasumiris. It was because he couldn't help wondering about the

daughter who had suddenly gone missing.

The San'Yasu's place was at the furthest southern point of Naka-Sotoba, in the vicinity of the bridge that spanned the small driver from the western mountain. Surrounded by concrete, it was more appropriate to call it a canal than a river. On the other side of that was Shimo-Sotoba.

Seishin entered the San'Yasu property going straight towards the entryway but while approaching he noticed the sliding storm door shutters were closed. The time was approximately 2:00, it wasn't a time when the members of the household would be asleep, was it? It made him remember the Murasako household in Yamairi. Seishin stood before the glass door of the entryway with some feeling of premonition.

As expected, the glass door wasn't open. Even pressing the door bell there was no answer. Just in case he went around to the other side but all of the windows were closed tightly, the storm doors were shut, the home was shut up completely.

If someone were just walking out somewhere, nobody would close up. The only time one would close up the house like this would be if going out to somewhere far away.

Confused, he returned to the front, looking across the road at the house facing this one. There was nothing but country land all around, the San'Yasus had no neighbors. The nearest house was just the Tamos across the way. They were one of two Tamo households in Naka-Sotoba. This one had the same house layout typical of a farming family like the San'Yasus, so he was able to see from the porch through the storm doors which were all open that there were people inside and to call out to them.

"Excuse me."

A middle aged woman whom he had seen inside, likely watching TV, turned to face Seishin who had gone as far as the front porch and called out to her. It was Tamo Yukiko.

"Well my, it's the Junior Monk." Yukiko said as she stood, coming out to the front porch.

"The heat is beginning to give, isn't it? How may I help you today?"

"Pardon me. This is about the Yasumori's next door, but."

Ah, said Yukiko. "You have business with the San'Yasus? Them, they moved, just the day before yesterday."

Eh, Seishin's voice raised.

"Well, do come on in. We don't have much, but there is at least tea." Yukiko encouraged enthusiastically, so Seishin gratefully accepted. The television lit up the living room, children's toys spread through the area, though there were no signs of children. As Yukiko returned from preparing the tea she hurriedly gathered them up as she said her grandchild was at the peak age of mischief. "He's finally old enough to walk, we can't take our eyes off of him. He's spreading his toys all over, crying out in a loud voice all day long, and a lot of trouble. His mother and grandmother have taken him out shopping, so I've just finally gotten a break," Yukiko said with a squinting smile.

"Is his grandmother doing well?"

"Well, thank you for asking. She's even healthier than I am! Grandfather died early, she she intends to live all that much longer, so she says, but it seems like she's really going to do it."

"That is most wonderful to hear," said Seishin with a smile, continuing with by the way. "About the Yasumori's."

Ah, Yukiko said looking towards the front of the house opening a bad of sweets. "They moved. The day before yesterday, or rather, that night."

"They were moving about to move in the middle of the night?"

Yes, Yukiko nodded. "Did they not go by the Junior Monk's place to give word. No, they didn't come to say their goodbyes here either. Anyway, we heard the car, and as it was time for going to bed, we looked wondering what it could have been to see a moving truck across the road."

"Was it... Takasago Movers?"

With a surprised beat, Yukuko nodded, Aa. "Come to think of it, there was a pine symbol on it. Was it such an ostentatiously named moving company?"

You're well informed."

Well, Seishin dismissed, dodging the matter.

With that moving truck in place, looking to be carrying out their luggage like, I was surprised and went over. When I did, they'd said they had moved. ---It was bizarre." Yukiko lowered her voice and hunched forward. "Junior Monk, did you know that the wife over there had gone missing?"

"I have heard a rumor about as much, but."

"She went missing. At the end of August, it was. Was it perhaps that evening when Meiko-san from next door came to ask if I'd seen her, and when I asked what was happening, she hadn't been there since that morning. When they awoke she was gone, and while they thought she had gone out, she still hadn't come back. I suggested they hurry and tell the resident officer. Lately, we just can't know what's going on in the village, after all."

You know what I mean don't you, was all Yukuko said exchanging looks with him. Seishin gave a vague nod.

"That's when she said that she would surely return once it turned to night, though. In the end, she didn't come back the next day. When I asked Meiko-san the story, she said that Hinako-san's travel case was gone, along with some of her clothes. She ran out, Meiko-san said, and my was she mad. ---But, this might not be appropriate to say, but, I had a feeling it would come to that some day. Their relationship with the wife of the household was poor, after all."

Yes, Seishin offered as sheer back channeling.

"Back before, you know? When Hinata-chan and Kouji-kun were getting together, there was quite the fuss. Meiko-san did not take to Hinata-chan. But she was a good girl, very social---of should I say, she was a modern, energetic girl who went all out! And it was decided that Kou-chan was going to be married to her. When talk of the marriage came about, they had already decided on the ceremony. The two of them were going to go off somewhere abroad by themselves to have the ceremony. That had Meiko-san and Seiichirou-san mad, didn't it! How terrible doing it abroad, and to decide on something like that all on their own, they said. To start with they hadn't even heard that the two were going to be married, there's no way they could allow it, they said. Well, if it had

been my own son, I'd have had a row, too, you know. I absolutely won't allow you to marry her, she's said, terribly threatening but the truth was by that time, Hinata-chan already had a bun in the oven, didn't she? It wasn't a matter of allowing or not allowing it."

"She was with child?"

"In the end, she miscarried, though. But since she was having a child, it couldn't be helped, Hinata-chan's parents couldn't keep quiet. Somewhere in there, everyone was making a stand, but somehow it calmed itself out and the ceremony was held in Mizobe. And once that was done, next time there was the dispute with Hinata-chan's own parents. I mean, the San'Yasu's oldest son left the home, didn't he? He was well put together ever since high school, and in the end he went to a good college in the city, and got hired a bit metropolitan bank. Never the less, Hinata-chan's parents said that since he would become like a second son to them they'd allow the marriage. But that doesn't mean living with them, that's another matter. Kou-chan tried to be slick like that, didn't he? Both families fought but all the while Hinata-chan's stomach was getting bigger, and Kou-chan, being Kou-chan, was as stuck on Meiko-san as ever. Ever since he was little, if his mother wasn't in sight that child would go around looking for her while crying, wouldn't he! In the end, while they said they weren't happy about it, they said fine to it, and in the end it was Hinata-chan's parents who had to fold, though."

Ha, Seishin nodded.

"Through this and that they got together but with it being like that before the marriage, there was no way it could have gone well. Anyway, the fighting had never died out. Meiko-san and Seiichirou-san were both cold to Hinata-chan, and at those sorts of times Kou-chan would back his mother, and with losing a child on top of that, and Meiko-san and her husband blamed Hinata-chan for that, well, for Hinata-chan and Hinata-chan's parents, that was just a terrible story. She couldn't bear being blamed after she'd lost a child, even though it was a dangerous situation for the mother herself! When it came to talking about whether she'd return to her home family or not, well, even we advised Meiko-san on what to do. You can't have that happen, we said. And so this time it was Meiko-san and their turn to bow their heads and apologize, somehow

bringing peace about, but as expected the fights didn't die out with that, did they?"

"Ah.... Is that right."

"In things like this, it's a husband's job to stand in the middle and somehow make things work out, but after all Kou-chan is a Mother-con or has an Oedipus complex is it called? He always had his own parent's back. So it looks like the fights with Hinata-chan never tapered out. Hinata-chan wasn't a bad girl but she wasn't the type who could stay quiet if there was something to be said. ---Well, I'd thought when I'd heard that Hinata-chan was gone that she'd returned to her home family at last too, but. Go to check with them, I'd said to even Kou-chan but Kou-chan and Meiko-san and her husband all said that if she wants to leave let her do what she wants. But, when these things happen, that isn't what you do, is it? If you're breaking up, break up properly, we tried to advice them. And so when they finally contacted her home family, the home family said she hadn't returned. It was her parents whose color went pale!"

Seishin blinked. "The parents from the other family were not aware of it?"

"That's right, they weren't! Her parents turned it around, asking what they were thinking not making contact until now, what would it come to if something happened to their daughter, with a fighting, threatening attitude. In the end, it was the other family who filed the missing person's report. Mieko-san and her group being them said they were sure it was probably a man, that she ran away with him without a doubt, and such outrageous things. But no, our own wife here talked with Hinata-chan a good amount yes? So that's why I can say this, but Hinata-chan was a more solid kid than you'd think, in spite of her all-out looks. She wasn't that kind of girl but when you first see her, her hair is red, and she dresses flashy so it's an easy mistake to make, that she was just playing around. That's, she did go out to Mizobe often, walking around until late at night it seems but with her husband's family being like that, she was returning to her home family to complain, meeting with girl friends to be comforted and the like. Mieko-san and them thought that she was playing out at night a lot, they were so sure that there was a man, though, yes?"

"...Is that so. "

As Seishin wondered what he did to deserve getting stuck listening to these endless family circumstances, Yukiko said: "And despite everything being like that, they said Hinata-chan called them."

"----Eh?"

"Like I said," Yukiko said as if convincing him to listen. "A call came from Hinata-chan, and they said they were going to live with her, you know. But, isn't that a bizarre story? If Hinata-chan came back, I'd understand that, don't you know. But living together, there's no way that could mean the San'Yasus moving, could it? Kou-chan had a job and all. Do you think there's any chance that Kou-chan would quit that job, that they'd abandon the mountains and their fields, to move into their wife's place?"

Seishin tilted his head.

It was impossible. Even taking the story with a grain of salt, she left due to so much antagonism---Even setting aside that it had been the same thing with Sakai-Matsu's son, he couldn't think that if the wife had called, the family wouldn't throw away their plots of land to go.

"That can't be, I said to them. Something like that, you can't expect me to believe it, I said. But you know? Mieko-san said that either way that's how it is, persistently. She was like... her eyes were glazed over. Like she was possessed, would you call it? She wouldn't say where she was going, what they were going to do. In the end, without saying where she was moving to, they moved away. And that's leaving behind their furniture and family goods. I saw the truck's loading tray after all. They really took the bare minimums. Packing up enough to barely call moving, they left their house in the night. I just find it so creepy I can't stand it!"

That was abnormal, Seishin thought. That move was strange no matter how he thought about it. He could only think that Mieko saying it was in order to live together with Hinako was a lie. Yet all the same, why would she have to tell such a life and leave the village? They had a house and land. They had jobs and lives. To cast all of that off into the wind, never mind that they quietly fled away, to go so far as to use such a transparent lie, why could the family

absolutely have to pull out of the village so badly?

Yukiko breathed a sigh.

"And even still, my son's been saying some scary things, it feels so creepy."

"Scary things?"

Yes, Yukiko lowered her voice. "You don't think Hinata-chan's buried in the yard behind the house, do you, like."

It can't be, Seishin started to say when he realized he couldn't necessarily deny that. ---No, that wasn't it. It wasn't a matter of the probability not being the possibility. It was that there was a shadow from the undeniably ominous thoughts looming after the San'Yasu's move.

On the road home, Seishin couldn't help but become caught up in his thoughts. The problem was supposed to be a plague. Since summer, a continuing string of inexplicable deaths. That was supposed to be what Seishin was investigating. Certainly since summer the number of dead had not been normal. But all the same, thinking of Sakai-Matsu and San'Yasu, what was truly strange was not a matter of who was dead, he thought.

Something was advancing on the village. Wasn't the sickness but one part of that, was the impression he had. But, what was advancing? Incomplete moves and dead people, what significance was there that he was trying to say was between them----.

Part 5

That day, Toshio received the phone call informing him of Gyouda Etsuko's death in the evening. When Toshio had rushed there, Etsuko was without a doubt dead, and a few hours had passed since she'd died. It seemed she had died while her husband Bungo was in the mountaints. Her dead face was calm and her clothes were undisturbed. Lethargic and her breath just stopped. Toshio mechanically wrote acute renal failure on the death certificate.

When handing over the death certificate, Toshio requested for Gyouda to allow him to take a blood sample from Etsuko but, as expected, Gyouda refused. Aside from not being able to do a blood test, he could only theorize but

Etsuko had held out relatively well for her age. She was quick to visit the hospital, and with treatment for a bit its worsening had been abated. But--- Toshio thought as he returned to the hospital where patients were working him to death. The problem was that the bunch from the village were hurrying into the hospital when there was no particular condition, while the ones who were really ill were avoiding the hospital. Unable to get past their own physical condition, they didn't want to go out, and while avoiding that they became unable to move about.

What to do, he could probably have the patients hospitalized right away; while worrying thusly, examination hours ended. Seishin came when he was drawing back to his own room glaring at medical charts.

"---How is it?" Seishin opened, speaking first.

Toshio answered carelessly that it was hopeless. "As expected, the premonitory symptom's anemia. There's a fever too, but not too high. From there in about three days it dramatically worsens. Deterioration of multiple organs, furthermore accompanied by light edema and mild jaundice, or possibly blisters and inflammation from a diminished immune mechanism. Since antibiotics don't work, it isn't bacteriogenous."

"Bacteriogenous?"

"Vancomycin doesn't have any effect. I dare say it's probably not caused by a bacteria. At any rate, at the level where it's manifesting amnesia, with a full blood transfusion, it feels like there's some effect that keeps them alive longer. Characteristics outside of the anemia include blisters. In all cases festering traces of insect bites were found presenting near blood vessels. I think that confirms that there's an intermediary carrier but I can't concretely specify what it is. That's all the commonalities between the patients. Their physical health and characteristics, lifestyles and habits, circumstances, they're all unrelated. I can't think of it as contaminated water, soil, or food. It's not poison, it's an infectious disease. That much I can say for the time being is reality. ---And, on your end?"

Seishin opened the notebook. He passed over a copy folded within it to Toshio.

"A common point was, as usual, not found. As you can see. Also, ----I don't know whether this has any connection or not but...." Seishin hesitate to speak. Toshio, resting his chin in his hands, urged him to go on.

"Gigorou-san from Yamairi left and returned to the village when he was sick."

"You said that before too, last time," Toshio started to say, Seishin talking past him.

"Ohta Kenji, Hirosawa Takatoshi, Saeki Akira, Takashima Yasuo, Shimizu Gardening's Ryuuji-san, and Ohkawa's Shigeru-san, these six commuted to work outside of the village. And---Just before their death, suddenly, they retired from office."

Toshio titled his head. "What's that?"

"I'm saying, before they died they resigned without a word to their families. And furthermore, very, tremendously suddenly, quitting without a reason. In the case of Hirosawa's Takatoshi-san, he made as if he were going out to work and he was passing his time in the Pachinko parlor in Mizobe, where he collapsed."

"Funny story, isn't it..."

"Of the people who have died, there were six people who had commuted. Each of those resigned before they died.What do you think this is?"

Like I know? Toshio answered. "Just, if nothing else it's not connected to the disease. Those guys didn't have symptoms."

He tried to give a smile but Toshio himself wasn't satisfied with that dismissal. It might have been a coincidence but even so six people were six people, and all of them.

"Also, I know that this isn't related either but.... There are fewer people.. Have you noticed?"

"I *know*

there're fewer."

"That's not what I mean. Not just from dying. There are a lot of move-outs. There are also many who it's unknown if they moved or died. They're also suddenly leaving the village. They're leaving the village as if running away into the night, without a word to their neighbors." Seishin said, presenting the copy of the memo. In withered characters were written 22 names, not in Seishin's hand writing, and at the end of that, this time in Seishin's writing, "Maruyasu (San'Yasu) * Naka-Sotoba" was added.

"The circumstances of the moves are strange, too." Saying this, Seishin talked about the examples of the Sakai-Matsu and San'Yasus. Toshio scowled. Indeed, these circumstances were bizarre. But, unless they realized the illness and fled, moves were unrelated.

"I received the certificates of residence from Ishida-san, too. By the way, from August until now, there haven't been any moving notices turned in to him."

"Not a one?"

"Not a one. Even Takami-san's family did not turn one in."

"That's a strange story too, another one."

Toshio gazed at the note but it didn't invite much of his interest. It obviously had no connection to the disease. No matter how many people there may have been moving out, that wasn't within Toshio's sphere of action."

"I've been hearing that Yuzuki-san from the library had quit or that the principal of the grade school had wanted to quit too.Do you not think that something is odd?"

"That" Toshio threw down the note. "is a weird story if you want me to call it weird but,

but

, that and this case aren't related."

Toshio looked serious as he nodded.

"I don't think it is. But it doesn't make sense! It feels like something is happening in the village. It feels like, somehow, the illness is a part of that something."

"It's your imagination," Toshio declared. Something like a faint irritation seized him.

"I've thought that may be the case. But, Sadaichi-san had noted this but look at that moving list. The people who came and went from Yamairi are cleanly, clearly gone now. The three living in Yamairi died, and the people who would have come and gone to Yamairi from any place else have done. With the people related to Yamairi gone, it really is settled. Doesn't Yamairi seem like a place of interest?"

Toshio breathed a sigh. "You can't just tie every little thing together."

"But."

"You're right that that was Yamairi and this is Yamairi too. You're right that there are a lot of people moving out too, and I'll even acknowledge that the circumstances are weird. ---But, what connection are you saying this has to the illness?"

"That's..."

Seishin casted his eyes down.

"It must've been a royal pain to investigate all this this far. But, this has nothing to do with us. What we have to think about right now is that disease on our hands. It's building momentum, don't you get it?!"

"That's..."

"You've completely lost sight of the point of the investigation. We have to prove that the string of deaths is being caused by an epidemic. We have to confirm what kind of disease it is, to find a way to treat it. And yet here we are with its premonitory symptoms being hard to read, with it getting to the point where nothing can be done but the time the people around them notice it!" Toshio spit out. While saying it, he knew his own words were setting off his irritation. "We need medical cases. And yet the villagers aren't coming in to the doctor until it's gotten worse! They're counting on a lay person's judgement and folk remedies! As circumstances get worse and worse by the time they're brought in, and if there's no way to save them, I can't even track how it

progresses! ---There's no doubt it's an epidemic. There's probably a carrier animal. That's all that we know. We can't even overlap the disease's consistencies. It's true I'm not an epidemiologist. Nor am I a researcher. I'm just an ordinary private practice doctor. There're limits to what I know, I won't deny that. But, I've still put my best into this. But, even if I research and research, I just keep thinking more and more that these symptoms shouldn't be happening. There's nothing wrong with blood formation or hematosi. There's nothing wrong with their bone marrow. We're not finding any internal bleeding. All that leaves is hemolysis but the hemolysis reaction's not happening. Anemia that shouldn't happen is happening. And it's getting violently worse. There're way, way too few medical cases. So it's nothing but a bunch where the mechanism that leads to their deaths don't even match up!"

Toshio smacked the mountain of clinical records.

"The essential patients don't come in until the sickness has gotten to the last stage. And yet the number of patients with pointless complaints of illness are increasing. How many patients do you think come in in one day lately?! Even the staff are mentally strained! They're tired!"

With his eyes still cast down, Seishin remained quiet.

"You think I give a damn about the bunch who leave here because they want to? You've wasted our time! On top of that, you even asked Sadaichi-san, you said?! What do you think Sadaichi-san's going to make of you sniffing around here and there?! Not just that, the bunch in this village aren't idiots! They're starting to notice something's up! If on top of that it gets around that the Junior Monk from the temple's asking around for information, isn't that going to fuel their uneasiness even more!"

The one who was depressed was taking on an explosive form. Seishin tried to say something but in the end he held his tongue. The sympathy he'd felt towards Toshio was visible there on his face. Seishin probably thought that Toshio was impatient and tired, making him irritable. And he'd be right, but right then that compassion laden gaze was rubbing on his nerves the wrong way.

"If you've got the time to spare for all that, then take note of the faces of the

people who come to the temple. Looking to see if people are sick, straining your ears to hear if people are talking like someone in their family has a cold would be who knows how many times more useful!"

Seishin didn't object. I understand, was all he said shortly, his head bowed faintly at something.

Part 6

As he lit the lamp, Seishin confirmed anew that he had come to the sanctuary because he was depressed.

It was already past midnight into the hours labelled AM. Early in the morning the temple was asleep, so be it in the office or his own room, there was no need to think that someone would poke their heads in. If he simply wanted to be alone, he could have been by himself anywhere he liked at the temple. And yet taking the trouble to walk all the way out to here, he must have been looking for some comfort in this desolated church, he thought.

He doubted he would come out here so incessantly if it were just an abandoned house. There was probably some meaning to this being a sacred place. At the same time if this were a genuine church, he was uncertain whether he'd have walked here or not after all. Seishin looked up at the altar and realized that if this were touted as an earnest object of worship, he wouldn't likely be so attached to this place. While it was clearly a sanctuary, there was no God enshrined at the altar. He might have realized as much.

Yes---that much was probably more than certain. Right now, he had just become aware of that. The proof of that was that ever since he'd lit the lamp. Seishin had been unconsciously listening closely.

At some point, insects voices petered out. All that filled the church was the sound of the wind. Within that the faint creek of a door hinge echoed.

"Good evening," Seishin lightly waved to the little girl who came in through the lurching door. "It's gotten cool, hasn't it?"

"Yes," Sunako nodded. "The scent of the night has completely changed. Fall is

coming, isn't it?"

"It seems like it has, doesn't it?"

"Have you made some progress?"

Seishin shook his head at Sunako who sat on a nearby bench.

"I see... It sounds troublesome. Is that why Muroi-san is feeling down?"

"I wonder about that."

"You don't know?"

Mm, Seishin nodded honestly. "If I don't do something somehow, is what it is, I think. But it's true that I'm frustrated with myself for not being able to do anything. While I'm doing this, many people are dying. Yet there isn't anything at all I can do."

"It's futile?"

"Mm, it is. --But, more than me, it's Toshio. Toshio is a doctor, he has carries a duty towards his patients. But he cannot save them. His patients keep dying. I know that he's impatient, that he feels helpless. He's upset that he can't do anything and is angry. He's losing his temper."

"How piteous."

"Mm, it is piteous."

Seisuin sighed. --Yes, he had intended to fully understand Toshio's sentiments. He sympathized with the position Toshio was put into. Because he was his friend, he wanted to help him. And yet he couldn't do anything.

"As for me, though, I think about how much I want to help Toshio. But the truth is I can't do anything. Toshio is irritated with me for that."

"Because Muroi-san is not useful? Isn't that what they would call taking it out on you?"

"Mm, that's right. It isn't that I'm not useful that's irritating him, he's upset with himself I think. And by nature, Toshio isn't someone who will forgive himself for acting like that. So seeing it, it's painful."

Sunako tilted her head.

Seishin said nothing more, only smiling.

Seishin wanted to help Toshio. Because he understood Toshio's temperament, he believed he understood how frustrated he was with himself right now. So, Seishin intended to serve him with his utmost in his own way but it seemed Toshio didn't accept that. He'd wasted his time, he accused.

Being condemned in itself wasn't really something that especially depressed him. What was sad was that Seishin couldn't get it through to Toshio that he understood Toshio's irritation. He understood Toshio's impatience, so he wanted to abate that any little bit that he could, he was acting to that end, and that Toshio did not know that was sad. --No, Toshio probably knew that. But he was upset with himself, and had to lash out at Seishin. He wasn't blaming Seishin, he was blaming himself. He knew even that much, so he couldn't be unjustly upset with him, so when he looked back on it afterwards, he would be plagued by even more self loathing, and he had pity for Toshio when that time came.

"I cannot put it well into words, but I more or less understand Muroi-san's feelings."

"Do you?"

Sunako nodded. "Your feelings aren't being conveyed. No, the Junior Doctor of the Ozakis is impatient with the situation and closing off his feelings. So while Muroi-san tries to communicate, he cannot receive what is being conveyed. Muroi-san is lonely because of that, yes? More than for not being able to convey your own feelings, it's painful when the other will not open their heart to receive what you're trying to convey. Humans are isolated like that. You can't stand it---am I wrong?"

Seishin forced a smile. "You're amazing."

"Oh my, well, I am Muroi-san's fan," Sunako laughed. "It isn't as if I need to guess when it comes to Muroi-san's feelings. It's just that I had thought as much before when reading Muroi-san's books."

"Heh?"

"Humans are isolated, aren't they? They cannot understand each other meaningfully. Even if they think that they understand, even if they understand the and confirm matters speaking the same language, they don't know if they really understand each other. They make contact with others wanting to be understood and sympathized with but all of that is nothing but an illusion. And that is a very lonely thing. ...When reading Muroi-san's books, I have thought that."

"Hmm?"

"Surely the author is lonely too, it felt like. I just remembered that."

Is that right, Seishin forced a smile.

"Say, may I ask a question? The story Muroi-san is writing now, what kind of story is it?"

"...The story of a man wandering a wasteland."

Sunako tilted her head.

"An older brother who killed his little brother is exiled from the town and wanders the wasteland. His dead little brother follows after him. ---A story like that."

"His dead little brother became a ghost?"

"It's a little different. A Shiki."

"Shiki?"

"A corpse demon. The risen. The dead body rises up, coming up from the grave. There's an oni like that in the village."

"...Aa," Suanko said becoming a bit lost in thought. "It's different from a ghost, isn't it? If they've risen up, they have a proper body. But it's the body of a corpse. It isn't as if they've been revived."

"Mm, right."

"But it isn't a simple corpse like a zombie, is it? They have a proper consciousness, an existence equal to humans. But they aren't alive. They're a

completely different existence." Saying that, Sunako tried feeling the word Shiki in her mouth. It seemed she had taking quite the liking to that word. She gave a satisfied laugh. "I think it is good! So very good! --The little brother became a Shiki and follows his brother, yes? That's from Genesis, isn't it? Cain and Abel."

"Mm... Well, yes."

Sunako nodded several times. "How interesting. Even though Muroi-san is a monk, many of your stories have a non-Buddhist religious atmosphere. This time it's the Bible? Before that it was Greek Mythology, and before that, a Native American one."

"Aa, now that you mention it, it's true."

"But, this time it is Cain again, isn't it?"

Seishin blinked. "Again?"

"Right. A story of heresy. Cain was a heretic, wasn't he? How shall I put it--- one who is inexplicably distinct."

"Cain is a very significant figure in the bible."

"I know that. I'm not talking about the Bible, I'm talking about Muroi-san's literary style. Isn't that true of Cain? I don't think that Cain understood why he was rejected by God. He was denied as a heretic and felt alienated, I think. So he was jealous and killed Abel, right?"

"That's the common reading, isn't it?"

"It has to be that kind of story. The story of someone abandoned by God."

"I guess it is."

Sunako nodded. Folding both hands behind her back, she looked up at the half-destroyed altar. "....A man who grew horns. Suddenly, a horn grew on him, and he feared himself who had become different from the common man. Because he would be unreasonably discriminated against, he was desperate to hide it. But, the man ended up worshiped as a God, didn't he? And demanded to perform miracles. Even though he didn't have the power to perform miracle, he just had a horn."

Watching Sunako walk about, Seishin gave a bewildered nod.

"The man was relieved he wasn't discriminated against but he didn't have the power to perform miracles. He was afraid that of other people knew that, that it wasn't a sign of being a God, that it was nothing more than proof he was a heretic. But nobody could blame him for the fact that no miracle happened. --- The man was a heretic after all. He was called a god and excluded because he was consecrated. The horn was the mark of a heretic. Like the mark put on Cain. Because of it he was unreasonably denied and excluded from society. There was no objective reason to ostracize him. But he couldn't run away from that. It's the same as Cain, isn't it?"

Seishin nodded. "It seems like it is."

"You weren't aware of it, Muroi-san?"

"Mm. I realized it just now. It's certainly so."

It was the same pattern based on a heretic.

"It's interesting isn't it. But I like that about Muroi-san's works. The pain of being abandoned by God, like? Minotaur himself knew that he was not a god, and was afraid he would be rejected, so he made a miracle happen himself, didn't he? By killing a sinner a curse was born. The villagers feared and honored him, building up a wall. In other words, to keep him at a distance, right? And for each who were killed another wall was built, until a grand labyrinth was built around him. He was hidden deep in the labyrinth. And to appease his anger, they presented sacrifices. What he wanted was to be allowed to enter into society as a god but society kept refusing him---" Sunako said, her feet stopping. She turned to look at Seishin. "But, how mysterious. Why is it?"

"Why is it?"

"All of Muroi-san's stories seem like that, do they not? But, Muroi-san doesn't look as if he's been abandoned by God. Aren't you a very important person in the village? It looks like the people of the village love the Junior Monk of the temple. Everyone praises you, Tatsumi was saying. Respected and adored, you are an important person of the village, perfectly involved."

"It's true that I am involved."

"Isn't it? And it looks as if Muroi-san loves the village too. It's thought of as

very important to you. It was so in the essay, too. Even now you are whittling into your spare time by running about looking for a counter measure to the disease, aren't you?"

"That's true. ... Yes, I do indeed love the village. I think it's important."

"But, your works are like that," Sunako said with an impish laugh turning her back. "And, you have scars."

Seishin realized he was subconsciously grasping his watch.

".....Why?" Sunako turned to look over her shoulder at Seishin who shook his head.

"I don't know."

Actually, Seishin loved the village. Seishin wasn't estranged. He was indeed involved as a center of faith, and as the villagers were not frugal in their love and respect towards him, Seishin thought that he wanted to repay that. And so he was making his efforts now.

But, at the same time it was true that Seishin was trying to run away from something. He hadn't realized it himself until Sunako pointed it out but the pain of being "abandoned by God" threaded through Seishin's writings. It was possible that even that was based in some unidentified impulse.

Maybe he felt somewhere in his heart that he was "abandoned by God" and because of that pain once tried to fatally injure himself. That was indeed heavily involved in the figure Cain. Was that why he had yet again subconsciously chosen Cain as his protagonist?

The problem was that Seishin didn't have any awareness of being "abandoned by God." He couldn't understand why he would feel that way. No matter how he thought about it, he didn't think that he was, and didn't think there was a need to think that he was.

"How funny. If Muroi-san is that influenced by it, wouldn't that mean it is something important to Muroi-san? And yet if you're not aware of it, you don't know why, do you?"

"Mm. That's right."

"Your subconscious is leaking out. Authors are mysterious indeed."

"...You said it."

After Seishin parted from Sunako, while walking the mountain path, he thought with each step.

The Minotaur that Seishin wrote was a heretic. He became a heretic when he got the horn but it was possible that he was essentially a heretic from the beginning. The horn was only a manifestation of that. Cain had the sin of killing his little brother---and that reflected Seishin's sin of fatally wounding himself.

(But still, why?)

Seishin was indeed included in the village. As a pillar of faith to be he was an important part. The people around Seishin wished for him to be, and more importantly, Seishin himself wished as much. As Sunako had pointed out, the village was important to Seishin. He accepted that it had its own foolishness, its own imperfections but he came to of it as good even for those.

And again, Seishin did not accept that he himself was a recipient of unreasonable prejudice like Cain. If nothing else, Seishin wasn't, he recognized. There were prejudices but he hadn't thought of them as unreasonable. As for their reverence, love and respect, those were merely earnest gratitude. The parish families and their great and ginger caution towards Seishin were things that Seishin had clearly brought on himself. He knew that there were those in the village who spoke malicious gossip about him but he didn't think of them as unreasonable. Indeed Seishin Indeed, Seishin knew from common sense about the village that fingers pointed at him saying "he's the one." It wasn't an unjust distinction. He had never felt unreasonably denied or estranged. If so then why did it have to be Cain again?

Seishin returned to the office and spread out the Japanese writing paper.

The green fields expanded without end, eventually the greenery being mixed at intervals with white stones and red clays. At the ends of the lands of gently undulating hills which green draped over like a moss were gigantic castle walls. The sturdy ramparts, as if to shroud from the eyes of those who dwelt outside of it, spread out, and then, at that eastern block, a small closed gate. Until he had been driven out from that gate into the wasteland, he had never

seen the wasteland. He only vaguely understood on an intellectual level that the lifeless barren land spread out. He had never held interest in the outer world, and that it would become a scene he was in was something he had never imagined. The world for him was the same as the hill, for it was the same as if there existed no place at all beyond it.

In an enclosure of the fields was a meager dwelling, and from the field came a modest crop for food. That was when his little brother had still been there with a body that circulated warm blood. His little brother kept sheep in the green fields, and he planted grains and corns near their dwelling, just enough for the two of them to satisfy their daily needs. The neighbors were gentle and kind hearted, the hands they extended ever warm.

Looking back on it, he thinks that he was fulfilled there. If he weren't, why would he yearn for the hill as he did, thinking of it with an almost mad love? Actually he had loved working. He liked plowing the soft soil around the house, looking at the fascinating and elegant black colors which held such nutrients, and he thought fondly of the smell of the earth. There he scattered the seeds, thinking pleasantly of the small dots of pea-green that would bug there, and being blessed to watch over them as they grew there.

He leaned over as if to speak to the great earth, and when he incidentally rose up, the surroundings were green on one side. Beyond the gentle undulations was the ever green of the forest, and in that direction the towns buildings, only their points shining through. The conspicuously tall tower was awash in splendorous light even in the daytime, confirming that something grand was watching over him each time he looked upon it.

The green field was swarmed with wild growths of flowers, dotted with white down fluffed sheep peacefully feeding on the grass. His little brother at times chased after a sheep that wandered off from the flock scolding it, and at times stood amongst the sheep and, like his brother, gazed beyond the fields and the forests to the head point of the town. Realizing he was being seen resting, he would turn around with a smile and raise a hand.

In the gentle twilight, with the austere evening bells, the safe and protected people gave thanks to the splendor for the day. For gentle firelights, for a contented evening meal, for ample sleep in their warm beds, the golden break of dawn, the songs of the birds, the feel of the breeze, the smell of the rain, the

warmth of the sheepfold's stables.

There he was truly fulfilled. And yet none the less, there inside of him like a hard pit, a single sadness was born.

Though the world was this beautiful, it was not for him.

If asked why, it was because he was a heretic.

Culture and Translation notes

Chapter 7 - 2

*The temperature was still a far throw from being called cool but **the skies seemed higher...***

In the summer in Japan, there is the high atmospheric pressure from the Pacific Ocean and in fall there's the one from the continent. There's less moisture in the one from the continent than the one born of the ocean, so the sky's blue seems deeper and the sky seems clearer. When there isn't as much water vapor and the rising currents are weak, the summer's cumulonimbus clouds give way to more cirrus clouds, which are wispy, feather like, cirrocumulus which are grainy and made from ice crystals, and the thicker, chunky massed altocumulus clouds. These are clouds situated higher than the typical summer cumulonimbus clouds, further differentiating the seasonal look of the sky.

Class duty

- In Japan, chores for tending to the classroom maintenance and cleaning or helping the teacher with things like delivering attendance sheets or making printouts are handled on a rotation basis, usually weekly.

Chapter 8

Part 1

September ended and turned to October. Toshio tore off September's page from the calendar.

There was a call from Ishida that morning. Yesterday, Takemura Michiko from Monzen died. Just before noon, Hirosawa Toyoko who lived in Naka-Sotoba had come. Her color was poor and he was taciturn. Toshio had seen that face and realized it was that.

He asked into his patient's history thoroughly. That was how he came to be told that her son had died recently, one named Takatoshi.

(Did she catch it from her son---considering that possibility, that's quite an interval...)

Toshio peered into Toyoko's face, telling her that there was something bothering him, so he would run in-depth tests, and that he wanted her to come in for certain tomorrow to hear the results of those tests.

"Haa."

Toyoko, like all the others who had it, gave a vague nod.

"I'm thinking it'd be better to see how this progresses. I'm making you an appointment and will keep that time open, so don't make that a waste. Tomorrow, I'd like to have you be absolutely sure to come in for me."

"But... I think that I am just tired, though? My son died, my energy is just..."

"That's why I'm worried. It'll be at your convenience. If the morning is inconvenient for you, noon, evenings, even at night is fine. If you prefer I'm not even opposed to a house visit, so can you be sure to come for me?"

Toyoko at last nodded.

Toshio nodded, exchanging looks with Kiyomi who was at his side and giving

her instructions. Take her vital signs, blood and urine samples, bone marrow samples and an EKG, a chest and abdomen XP. Kiyomi gave an understanding nod and pressed Toyoko to please come with her.

On the brink of the noon break one more person, an elderly person who lived in Mizuguchi, came in with the expected symptoms. The patients were many, and while the morning patients weren't yet all in order, a request for a house call came in. It went without saying for Toshio, and even the nurses didn't have the time for a break.

When Ritsuko finally was able to eat lunch it was past three in the afternoon. The afternoon examinations would run late, and the time to return home was slowly being pushed back.

"It's become a real hassle, hasn't it." Yasuyo spoke of it while laughing.

It really has, Kiyomi laughed, cleaning up her boxed lunch leftovers and bringing her tea cup to her mouth. It was now the season where teas hotter than barley tea were most satisfying.

"But at least we can take a break like this. The doctor won't have any breaks this evening or tomorrow, it's a hassle."

"Uhm," Ritsuko gazed into her teacup as she spoke. "I'd like for this not to be taken the wrong way but...."

Turning a doubtful gaze to Kiyomi and Yasuyo, they gave her a weak smile.

"I am thinking of asking the Doctor if we could be allowed to come into work on Saturday afternoon and Sundays. I.... think that it's just too much for the doctor to do alone."

Kiyomi and Yasuyo exchanged looks. Ritsuko quickly added on. "I know that Nagata-san and Yasuyo-san have households to run. If you don't have a weekend it will be a hassle, won't it? But, I don't have anybody whom I have to take care of, and my house is nearby. So, if even I'm here at least, I think the doctor might be able to have a small break now and then. So, I was thinking of asking, like..."

Kiyomi gave a light burst of laughter. "Well, that's! We were thinking the same thing. ---Right?"

Kiyomi looked to Yasuyo.

"That we were. Ricchan, you've caught it from us, haven't you!"

"Eh?"

"Because you know? I was saying the same thing to Kiyomi-san. That wouldn't it be better to have the hospital open on Sunday too. The Junior Doctor is surely considering our feelings and not saying anything so, it might not be a bad idea if we all here are the ones to put the idea out there, like."

"....My."

Kiyomi smiled.

"The doctor's that kind of person so unless the circumstances are extremely dire, he won't say something like don't take a day off, come in. But on the other hand, the doctor himself's going to get worn down. He really hasn't had any break in all of this, driven all night until dawn."

"Yes... he is, isn't he."

"So that's why, I think we here need to remember that we're supposed to be like some type of angel of mercy for him too. I was saying that to Yasuyo-san. But, if we did that, what about Ricchan? Yuki-chan and Sato-chan live far away so it's natural that they couldn't come, but it's not like that for Ricchan. But, there's the matter of interfering in a young girl's chances at dating, too."

"Uhm..." They turned to face Yuki and Satoko. "We were talking about that too, actually."

"Well, oh my."

Ritsuko and the others looked to the two young nurses.

"I mean, really, the doctor's in having a hard time, though. Lately, doesn't he look tired and all tense? There are this many nurses, and since the hospital is closed over the weekend, there are people who won't bother the doctor and don't get a doctor's care at all."

"Right, so. We should try talking it over with the doctor, we said. Should we come in on the weekends too? In exchange, please make arrangements for us

to use a hotel in the village. Even Towada-san is renting an apartment from the doctor, so it isn't something he can't do is it? If it comes down to it, there are at least the sick rooms. If we do that, it'll be closer, it'll be easier on us...."

"I'd get to try living on my own too," Yuki said fleetingly sticking out her tongue "My parents know it's busy right now, so I thought they'd let me go. I want to try living on my own but they absolutely won't allow it."

"That's just like Yuki-chan. How calculating you are."

"Hehehe. So like, we were talking about trying to talk to him."

The one whose quiet voice spoke up was Shimoyama. "If the Doctor will accept those conditions, I might try having a talk with him, too."

Ritsuko's mouth popped open. "But, doesn't Shimoyama-san have a wife and child..."

"That's what I mean. I don't want to bring anything strange home. Either way it probably won't last that long anyway. Once the doctor gets the data together, if he can get the administration to take action for us, there won't be any more of a rush for me to do anything. Changing posts to leave my family behind until then wouldn't be so bad."

After the consultation, Ritsuko and the others called in Toshio and stated their conditions. Toshio was for a moment wide-eyed as he looked around at the faces of all who had gathered.

"Oi, oi. Are you all trying to bankrupt me?" Toshio said with his habitually abusive tone. "Even if you're not, what about the exams for over-time examinations? Living expenses and allowances'll make me declare bankruptcy."

So he said, but looking at his face it was clear that wasn't his true sentiment.

"It might be best for you to go ahead and do that."

Told such by Yuki, Toshio wore a broad smile.

"But, Shimoyama-san will be a problem. I'm gonna end up strangled to death by his wife."

"Then, it's good that you're prepared to be strangled to death. If you need help, please say as much."

Shimoyama smiled, Toshio laughed, and then lightly bowed his head.

"---Thank you."

Part 2

The next day, Toshio was woken by a phone call. It was a phone call to notify him of the death of Maeda Iwao who lived in Kami-Sotoba. They said even if the family called his name, he wouldn't wake up. They didn't think he was breathing, and that it was possible he was dead. He replied that he'd go right away but until that day Toshio had never gone on a house call to the Maeda household. They must have been a family without much need for a doctor but at any rate he asked for directions on the phone.

While preparing to go out, his mother Takae awoke and came in.

"Another one?"

Even Takae understood that an early morning phone call meant a death notice. The deaths had continued to the point where she couldn't not know.

"Seems like it," Toshio answered.

"Just what is going on?" Takae's voice was pregnant with urgency. Toshio looked back at his mother's face which was a mixture of anger and unease.

"This is how many times you've gone out like this? Something is happening in the village. Why are so many one after another...."

Who knows, Toshio answered coldly while moving to leave the main wing of the house when his mother grabbed his arm.

"It can't be that it's an epidemic, right?"

Toshio turned back to look at Takae in surprise. ---Right, if it came this far, it'd be stranger not to suspect it.

"....I don't know."

"You don't know! This many people are continuing to die, you realize?"

"I won't deny it looks like an epidemic. But running the tests nothing turns up a positive result. Going by the rest results it's not an epidemic. So all I can say is I don't know."

"But it's spreading isn't it?"

"This is just between us but probably."

Takae pulled the white coat from Toshio's hand. "You will not be going. You tell them to call an ambulance!"

"Mom."

"It's contagious isn't it? And not knowing what it is means that you cannot take preventative measures, doesn't it? You do know that running around like that every time someone dies puts you in the most dangerous position of all?"

Toshio sighed and patted Takae's shoulder lightly.

"I'm being careful enough. ---Now that I've been called, I can't not go."

"It can be someone other than you can it not?"

"The bunch in the village still haven't realized anything. I can't give them any inadvertent warnings, so I can't so easily just leave it to another doctor."

"This is no joke! Why should it be you who has to do something so dangerous? If by some chance something happens, what then!"

"But,"

"You are an only child, do you realize that? If you die, what will happen to the hospital. You still don't have a successor you know. Kyouko-san won't stay in the home, and---"

Toshio sighed. He took back his white coat from Takae's hand. "If it comes to it, you can adopt one who's turned out well from one of the relatives," Toshio said with a smile. "Or if not that, how about you get remarried, Mom?"

"Toshio!"

"....I'm going off." Toshio turned back around and took off in a small jog

towards the hospital. He took his bag and got into the car. It was about to be six o'clock but the surroundings were a little dark. The nights were getting longer.

To Takae she was "worrying about her son," he thought as he drove. It wasn't as if she particularly saw a son as a tool to continue the family. For Takae, it was impossible to consider herself separately from the family. Takae was a part of the Ozaki line, and Ozaki was the foundation on which Takae stood. Her son would succeed the Ozakis of which she had been swallowed as a part of. For Takae she was entrusting the most valuable thing to her own son, and because it was her son, she thought it appropriate to hand it over to him. Toshio as the successor was to accept that, and to share in participating in the honor of continuing the Ozaki line; this was nothing more than the manifestation of love itself, to Takae.

Unfortunately for Takae her son did not share in her values. Toshio had no attachment to Ozaki. In fact he came to feel it as a restraint. Toshio was no longer a child who cursed it to the point of saying Ozaki should just die out but he thought that if it was going to die out, he wouldn't mind if it did. At the very least he didn't appear to be taking any proactive measures to prevent it.

Even so the reason Toshio returned to the village wasn't for the sake of Ozaki but for the villagers who were depending on Ozaki. He didn't want to let them down. He chose a lifestyle of being needed and thanked by the villagers for his own sake rather than staying at the University while being absorbed in political considerations.

---We aren't tools to continue the family.

Yes, that was what the successor of the mountain temple had said. It was when they were still kids unsure of their life course.

--We are individual human beings with free will. So, we have the right to live as we like, I think.

It wasn't just their families but the villagers too had expectations of Toshio and Seishin to continue the family. But neither Toshio nor Seishin had the obligation to bare that. One's own future should be decided by their own free will. But, Seishin had said, is choosing another future in order to disobey other's expectations ultimately really free will?

It was only natural that the villagers held expectations for Toshio and Seishin. Anyone would wish for there to be a doctor and anyone would wish for a head monk. Indeed the doctors and the temple were better to have than not. Nevermind if they were something unnecessary, they were clearly a necessity, and continuing to provide that was up to each of them. ---In the end, Toshio chose the path of remaining in the village as a doctor.

The village was isolated in the mountains, and just like villages all over Japan the young people were migrating out with nothing but old people left behind. They needed a doctor. So he became that. It wasn't self-sacrifice. He chose the life of being needed and thanked by others.

(And yet, I can't do anything....)

Toshio gripped the steering wheel. Since summer, the vigorously increasing number of deaths, that many people dying, were so abnormal that even Takae was suspicious and yet even now he couldn't find a plan for resolving it. The patients continued to increase. Since it started the fatality rate was one hundred percent, and he couldn't even grasp the mechanism by which it lead to death.

He arrived at the Maeda house in a dark mood. A middle aged woman stood waiting impatiently in the lit entryway of the prototypical farm house. After driving the car onto the property he hurried up.

"Doctor, I'm sorry."

"You're...."

Bowing her head quickly was Maeda Motoko. She was the mother whose child was hit by a car in the middle of the summer who came rushing in.

"For that time... thank you." Motoko said as if embarrassed, her head down.

"It's been a while. How's Shigeki-kun been after that?"

"Thanks to you it was nothing in particular. Truly, I was very rude at that time."

Maeda Shigeki was carried in in July, wasn't it? He already thought of that as a long time ago. It was already October, so more than two full months had passed

since then.

"Glad it wasn't anything serious."

When Motoko motioned him into the house there was a middle aged man standing alone in the entryway, standing as if to close off the path. It was probably Motoko's husband.

"The one who's not moving is your father-in-law?"

Yes, Motoko nodded and lead further inside. Crossing over the six tatami mat living room, there were two futons spread out, and at the side of one of those an elderly woman sat.

"Aa---Doctor, his breathing, the old man's breathing is...."

The one on her hands turning to face him was probably Motoko's mother-in-law. Toshio nodded and sat beside the bed. Laid out was a man past sixty. The shadow of death was already showing itself on him. For the time being Toshio took his pulse. There were no palpitations, his blood pressure was zero, and his pupils dilated.

"....He is gone."

His wife suddenly broke down crying. Seeing that, Toshio turned his eyes to Motoko who was hiding her face.

"Was he sick?"

Yes, Motoko nodded.

It was about three days ago that Motoko noticed her father-in-law Iwao's change in state. He seemed very sluggish, and he had no appetite. She thought his pallor was poor too. A long while ago, there were leaflets being passed out. Motoko remembered what they said, so she thought that Iwao might have had anemia. The leaflets instructed to go to the doctor. So Motoko also suggested to Iwao how about going in. But, "I won't," Iwao said.

Iwao was healthy, proud of the fact that since becoming sixty even at his age he had never once been sick. Maybe that was why he had an inclination to criticize anyone who slept but whose illness wasn't managed with that. In truth, he didn't have any specific illness, no cold nor stomach ache nor anything

keeping him bedridden. Every day, he was healthy and went out into the mountains and paddy fields. Iwao who was like that looked sluggish even to outsiders, so Motoko couldn't stop worrying about it but it seemed that Iwao didn't care for that. He had no need of a doctor, he insisted obstinately.

"I am not hurting anywhere."

The one who agreed with this was her mother-in-law Tomiko.

"That's right. Ojii-san is of a strong nature. In the first place you worry too much. You're kicking up a fuss right away."

"But..."

Tomiko raised her voice. "Well, Ojii-san is a child of man, of course he will get just a little sick from time to time! But, it can be cured by going into the mountains and sweating it off! Those who get sick? It's because they're not taking care of themselves! Ojii-san has been working hard all this time, getting up early, and not staying up late. He neither drinks nor smokes. So what in that would you say is ill?!"

"Yes.... but...."

"Enough," Iwao said frankly in poor humor. "I'll go to bed early tonight. That will cure it."

After that Motoko kept her mouth closed without pushing strongly anymore but as expected she couldn't help that it was on her mind. Iwao wasn't just healthy, he was in high spirits for an old man, and when he was in poor humor he was nagging and critical. It wasn't like him to keep his mouth shut aside from saying the minimal amount necessary, and while when he was displeased it was enough for Motoko and others to cower in fear, he wasn't aspiring to be terrifying. And the next day he didn't look to be cured. Iwao and Tomiko persisted as ever that it was nothing but when Motoko couldn't bare her unease and, flustered, opened her mouth, the two became angry with her.

Neither Iwao nor Tomiko had liked Motoko's timidity to start with. Being fearful and prone to worry was to Iwao and his wife a weakness, and weakness was not a good thing. You don't speak clearly, you hem and haw whenever talking about anything, you worry too much, you're always getting headaches

and stomachaches, Motoko's in-laws complained of her. Motoko was like that, so their grandchildren were also neurotic, they always shouted at Motoko. She herself was actually quite aware that she was too faint hearted, so Motoko was eager not to worry, not to brood, but she never did manage her father and mother-in-law's approval.

"In what way was he sick?" Asked by Toshio, Motoko said he 'felt' off. Toshio sighed. "Medically speaking?"

"No... Ojii-chan had said that it would improve if he slept, so...."

Tomiko's face snapped up. "That's right. It's true, he has never once been bedridden. Well, he was a sturdy person, he'd never taken poor care of himself!"

Okay, was all Toshio said. "Probably acute heart failure. Beyond that, I won't know unless I do a medical autopsy."

"Autopsy..." Motoko felt her color drain. "Uhm, you're doing to dissect Ojii-san?"

"That is not funny!" Tomiko sobbed as her voice raised. "It'd be preposterous to mangle Ojii-san!"

"It's because he hadn't seen a doctor. Essentially, since he didn't die within 24 hours of the last time I saw him, I can't write out a medical certificate."

Tomiko glared at Toshio. "I understand. ---Then, how much do I have to put out for you to write the medical certificate?"

"Mother-in-law!" Motoko cried out, looking between Toshio and Tomiko.

"And what could you mean by that?"

"Isn't that what this is about? If I don't put out what's to be put out, you're saying you won't put out a medical certificate."

"That isn't what I'm saying." Even an outsider could tell that Toshio was in a foul mood. "You're the one saying your husband was healthy. Just why is it that a healthy person would suddenly die? Something was wrong with him. But I guess that you don't want to know what was wrong with him."

"Knowing something like that doesn't make it something we can take back

now.."

"Well, that's true." Toshio's voice held naked thorns. "You can't take back not bringing him to a doctor when he was sick."

Tomiko glared at Toshio and then turned to face Motoko.

"It's because you're always being such a burden!"

Without thinking, Motoko stepped back, blinking.

"Go to the hospital, the hospital, you say that on a daily basis! Because you make a big fuss over nothing! That's why Ojii-san--that's why!"

Tomiko fell prostrate to the ground as if losing her words, voice raising up in a sobbing wail. Motoko's husband Isami rushed over to pat his mother's back. Toshio patted Motoko's shoulder as she huddled into herself. He quietly ushered her out of the room.

"....It'd be best not to mind too much. Obaa-chan's on edge."

"Yes...."

Toshio sighed. "It's because I blamed her. I have no excuse. Well, Iwao-san himself is probably regretting having too much faith in his own health."

That's true, Motoko mumbled. "Uhm, the autopsy?"

"I won't force it. To be honest I want to push it but, I can't very well ignore the wishes of the bereaved family. It's just, I can't write 'cause unknown' on a medical certificate, that is the truth."

"Yes... I am very sorry."

"I wonder if I can at least get a blood sample, though. I'd like even the smallest amount you can give me. If I can't have that, it's going to be a problem on my end too, so."

"Yes, but," Motoko looked towards the six mat room. Would Tomiko really give the okay?

"I'll be doing post-death procedures, so if you could just get your mother in law out of her seat. At that time, I'll manage something."

Motoko felt unsure but nodded. Toshio said his thanks and returned to the six

mat room. He explained it to Tomiko and had her leave her seat. Told to bring a change of clothes, Motoko went to seek them out.

"Mom, did something happen?"

When she went to the second story, Shigeki and Shiori were uneasily peeking their faces out from their room.

"A little bit," Motoko said as if she were talking in her sleep. "We have a guest, so don't come out of your room."

Looking over the two as they nodded, Motoko felt something in her stomach.

She should tell them properly. That grandpa died. But, she didn't know how to convey his sudden death. She cringed at the idea of hurting them by telling them artlessly. ---Wasn't it unjust of her mother in law to say like that that she worried too much? Actually, Motoko herself thought that she over-thought some things. Wavering like this, telling a lie for the time being, might have done them unnecessary harm. In the end, she couldn't come to a decision on what to do without consulting someone to tell her 'let's do this.'

Breathing a heavy sigh, Motoko entered the closet. Until he was placed in the coffin in the white funeral robes, it was customary for them to wear normal sleepwear, a yukata, or otherwise a kimono. Tomiko had said a yukata, so a yukata would likely be fine. Digging through the drawers, she took out as nice of one as she could find.

(And now, we're having a funeral too...) Motoko thought absently. It was summer when the old people had died in Yamairi. Just a while ago there was another funeral. An acquaintance of her friend Kanami---to be more specific, someone Kanami's mother had gotten along well with had died, it seemed. At Kanami's Chigusa, since summer, gossip of the continuing deaths and many funerals flowed. Actually, Motoko had heard frequent talk of a funeral here or there, and had actually caught sight of the scenes of people coming out of funerals. This year is strange, so everyone was saying. Each time Motoko only responded with "It is." It was true that there were many casualties. --At least, it was true that there was a lot of talk of death.

(But...)

Motoko suddenly felt oncoming goosebumps. It had just been a matter of talk before but it became a truth in her very presence. This was death. It was what was continuing, since this summer.

Motoko turned to see the scene behind her. Her uneasily nodding two children.

(Outsiders have come...)

Motoko shook her head. This and Iwao's death had no connection. It wasn't as if Iwao had died in an accident.

(Outsiders... in the village...)

Unrelated. So, there shouldn't have been anyone to come and snatch Motoko's children away.

---As long as they don't go near the national highway it'll be all right.

Motoko firmly convinced herself.

Part 3

"Say, Tatsu-san, have you heard?" Ohtsuka Yaeko came running to the storefront of Takemura. "The Maeda's Iwao-san died, they're saying!"

Heh? The one to raise his voice was Satou Oitarou.

"That old pops did? I didn't think there was anyone as healthy as him, too!"

When Tatsu asked when, Yaeko answered that it was that morning.

"In the morning when Tomiko-san woke up, he had gone cold next to her. What a shock it must have been, yes?"

"I wonder what it could have been," Ohkawa Namie said making a sullen face. "Why are this many people dying, I wonder, this year. Our Matsumura-san's place's daughter died too, just lately. Tomio oversaw the funeral."

"Well, my," Yaeko nodded. "Ours, too. The Ohtsuka Sawmill's son died too."

It was Hirosawa Takeko who had said isn't it strange. "Somehow or another,

isn't something strange? So many dying like this. It's been since this summer, hasn't it? I mean, back in Yamairi, it was five people."

"Five people," Oitarou blinked in surprise. "Were there that many?"

"There were!" Takeko said indignantly. "There were the three from Yamairi weren't there, then there was the Ohtsuka's son, and wasn't there the Muramatsu's daughter? That's five people, isn't it!"

Yaeko waved her hand. "I'm telling you, Iwao-san died like I said. It's six people, I'm telling you," said Yaeko, tilting her head. "Eh? No, we just talked about this recently, didn't we?"

Ah, Oitarou clapped his hands. "Nakano's son! Come to think of it he died."

"Oh me," Ohkawa Namie counted on her fingers. "Then, seven people?"

"Now hold on, there's still more. Look, the Shimizus' daughter is dead, isn't she? And then, Ohkawa. Namie-san, weren't they relatives of yours? Ohkawa's Shigeru-kun who died."

"That's right," replied Namie with a bewildered face. "Then what? Nine people?"

"That can't be right," Takeko said naming them off while counting on her fingers. "Seven, eight, nine... Well my, it really is nine people!"

Tatsu swallowed a breath. Something chilled in the pit of her stomach.

"We're forgetting the resident officer."

Ah, the old people's voices rose out. Each of them took on a dumbfounded expression. Tatsu watched over that, reciting it in her mind all the more. That wasn't all, she'd seen how many cars coming and going for funerals. The Yasumori contractors had a funeral too, and the Maruyasu saw mill had a death too. She didn't know who the others were but she'd seen at least two or three more cars at least. ---That number was abnormal.

"That's, I'm not Ikumi-san but, it's strange. Something's definitely happening." Oitarou wiped at his face like a cat.

"Strange, isn't it..." Takeko tried taking a peek at the other's faces. "I mean, it wasn't like there were any accidents. Everyone died from a disease, right?"

"It can't be that it's an epidemic, can it?" Oitarou said, Namie waving her hand.

"That can't be. If it were an epidemic we'd be told this and that by the Health Department. You know, we'd be isolated and all. If I recall, you can't bury them if it's an epidemic. I'd heard that a long time ago from my father."

"But if that's not it, how are this many people dying? And in three months---no, really, it's August and September, that's within two months."

"But it's not an epidemic."

The one to timidly, hesitantly raise her voice was Yaeko. "You don't think it could really be a curse or...?"

"A curse, what's this?"

"I don't quite get it but... Ah, look, there have been Koushin-samas broken here and there haven't there? It I recall, the Koubou-sama at the Shrine was broken too. A curse from that or..."

"How foolish," Takeko laughed from her nose. "Aren't you being influenced by Ikumi-san too much? If not her, then it's the Ohtsuka Sawmill's influence."

"No I'm not! That's, even I think it's foolish but, still, it's strange, isn't it?"

"Keep it down now," Tatsu interposed. She could see Ikumi coming down the village road before the shop. Following Tatsu's gaze, the elderly all at once closed their mouths.

"Well my, Ikumi-san, it's been a while," Yaeko called out with an unnaturally cheerful voice. Ikumi laughed, then moved to pass by the shop. "Oh my, Ikumi-san, not stopping in?"

Ikumi's feet came to a stop. "Maybe in a bit. I'm busy you know, personally."

"What's the matter," Oitarou asked in a surprised seeming voice. "Didn't you hear? Maeda's Iwao-san died, they say."

Yes, Ikumi laughed. She gave an ostentatious sigh. "I knew this was coming but it's still piteous. Then, I wonder if I shouldn't stop in on them a bit, perhaps? What a hassle it is, I really am just so busy."

Tatsu's brows furrowed. "You, you'd go to a house having a funeral and talk about curses?"

"Dear me. But I really must tell them. After all. If it keeps continuing it will be a problem, won't it? When one dies, they say they pull the family with them after all."

"What a diligent worker you are," Tatsu said, tone laced with sarcasm, but Ikumi gave a good humored laugh.

"They're so thankful to me. Well, of course there are people who just don't understand, but this world isn't all those who don't see the truth. Lately, people have been coming to me for exorcisms."

Well, my, Takeko said eyes wide.

"How is the direction of their house, things like that, they're consulting me. This too is a way of helping others, so of course I feel good giving them a consultation, but."

Tatsu gave a curt nod. That's it, she thought. That was why Ikumi was in such high spirits.

"We're not strangers, now, if something happens, all of you do say something to me! Especially Yaeko-san and Namie-san, yes? You have dead relatives don't you? Do be careful now!"

Part 4

When Tamo Sadaihci poked his head into the office, Seishin was just taking a break after the end of one memorial service. The only one in the office was Seishin. Mitsuo was running about on various errands while Tsurumi and the others were hurrying about for memorial services. The services for the deaths since summer had started working the temple staff to the brink of their own deaths.

"Junior Monk, have you heard?"

Heard what, Seishin asked Sadaichi as Sadaichi made a greatly troubled expression. "It's about Masaji-san of Naka-Sotoba, but."

Seishin's back tensed. It was the Naka-Sotoba's manager, old man Koike.
"Something happened to Masaji-san----?"

"Well, that's just it. It's not what happened to Masaji-san but in his son's family, they've left."

Seishin started as if poked in a blind spot. "They've left?"

"Right. Last night you see, there was a Shrine Parish meet and greet. Were you aware that Naka-Sotoba's San'Yasu had moved?"

"Yes, I had heard."

"The San'Yasu's Seiichirou-san was Naka-Sotoba's Village Administration's manager, and since that person suddenly moved on us, we can't go without replacing him. Soon enough we'll have to be thinking about November's Kagura. And so, for the time being we were going to try to consult with the Koike's Masaharu-san. ---Well, even if we called it a meeting, since it was that kind of talk, it wasn't much different from idle chat, though. As usual everyone drank into the night, grumbling over our cups but, then from there when Masaji-san went home, the people from his house weren't there, is the story."

That can't be, Seishin blinked.

"Masaji-san was shocked, then a call came. He was worried about what on earth was going on, but then this morning came---just a little while ago. One of the neighbors informed hi that while Masaji-san was out, the usual Takasago Movers were there, they came by!"

"They had moved? Leaving behind Masaji-san? Without consulting with him about it?"

That's exactly rightt, Sadaichi said perplexed. "Junior Monk, you haven't heard anything? From the Ozaki's Junior Doctor."

Seishin saw Sadaichi's imploring face, relying on him. "There's a rumor about a spreading disease, for the record."

"A spreading---disease."

"Since summer, right, haven't there been a lot of them, deaths. There's some kind of bad disease spreading around, isn't there, everyone is saying, but it's

said half in jest. All the same, just two days before yesterday, Takemura's Michiko-kun died, didn't he? Wasn't he strange, wasn't it really an epidemic, they said."

It couldn't be, Seishin tried to answer but couldn't. He merely shook his head.

"Junior Monk, what is it? Have I not been hearing various talks of the Junior Monk going out amongst the people to talk with them? Is that---"

"Sadaichi-san," Seishin spoke over him. "I am not able to answer. If you must know, please ask Toshio directly."

Sadaichi kept silent and looked fixedly at Seishin's face.

"...Soon now here, may I call together a ward headman's meeting, I wonder?"

"Before that, one with the village three," Seishin said, to which Sadaichi nodded. Silent and greatly troubled, he let out a deep sigh.

Seishin saw Sadaichi off, left Mitsuo in charge while he was out and left the temple. He went straight towards Naka-Sotoba, visiting old man Koike. Old man Koike sat alone in the middle of a wide house, his back hunched in despondency.

"Koike-san."

Noticing Seishin when he called out to him from the veranda, Koike gave a tiny nod of salutation. It seemed he knew what Seishin had come for.

"Uhm---I heard from Sadaichi-san."

"Anyways, come on in."

Seishin bowed formally and came in to the living room. Koike was seated, gesturing only with his gaze, as expected not very prone to moving about as if the energy had been taken from him.

"Your son and his family have gone missing?"

Koike nodded deeply. "Honestly... I can't imagine what they're thinking."

"They really have left?"

"Seems so. One of the neighbors saw them piling luggage into a truck after all."

"Yasuo-san stated nothing of his intent?"

Koike shook his head. "No proclamation, nothing left written. When I contacted his work a bit ago, he went and quit three days ago."

He quit, Seishin repeated. Koike's son Yasuo was, if he recalled, employed at NTT in Mizobe.

"Seems he didn't give a reason for quitting. It's a shock. My son, you know, he quit his job without a word to me and took off with his family, I'm pathetic, I'm hurt..." Koike said rubbing at his eyes with the palm of his hand.

"Uhm.... Before hand was there something, had he not said anything like that? Pardon me for asking but was there a dispute of any sort?"

Nothing, Koike said as if casting it out. "When I came back last night, the house was all dark. Anyone and everyone wouldn't be asleep at that hour, these days my granddaughter is quite the night owl, you see. And then, I thought something happened. Thought maybe my grandson had gotten sick, or." Koike's mouth warped in self derision. "When it comes to the child, you know, he'd been sick since the day before yesterday. He was dizzy when he stood up, sat down right after getting out of the bath. We were letting him sleep."

Seishin watched Koike's trembling mouth in shock.

"Yasuo was in a daze like too, and his wife seemed to be slipping in energy too. With my grandson like that on top of it, the older grandchild looked pale faced, I thought the family had all caught a cold together.And I thought that when it wasn't nothing of the sort, they were hiding something in their hearts, just holding something silently in. I can't tell if they felt guilty towards me or held a grudge towards me."

"....Koike-san."

Koike shook his head without meaning. "I didn't think about any of that, when I saw the lights of the house were out, I thought maybe the youngest child was sick and they took him to the hospital, you know. When they get scared, they'd take him..."

"Please wait a moment. Koike-san."

Seishin leaned forward towards Koike. "He was ill? The youngest child--he was Ikuo-kun, wasn't he? If I recall."

"Yes."

"Ikuo-kun, what condition was he in? Did he have a fever?"

No, Koike blinked with depression-sunken eyes. "It didn't seem like he had a fever, did it? Cerebral anemia, they said that was probably what it was. He was a thin boy to start with, he was prone to anemia, low blood pressure, things like that. His face was pure white like paper, but there was no fever."

"Did he have a headache, or nausea or...?"

"No. He didn't especially say anything about that."

"This was the day before yesterday?"

"Haa."

"How about Yasuo-san. The other people? Did it have the same feeling?"

"The oldest child had the same feeling. Like she was in a daze. ---No, the one in a daze was Yasuo, was it? It was what you might call sluggish or what you might call sleepy. The expression was odd.. I thought maybe someone was drunk or something."

"Please wait a moment. Who is this discussing? The oldest---Touko-chan? Or perhaps Yasuo-san?"

Well, uhm, Koike grumbled. "I... don't right now."

"Is it possible that everyone was in a similar state?"

When Seishin said it, Koike returned Seishin's stare flabbergasted, murmuring that he guessed they were. "They were---that's right. Indeed, everyone was in the same way. All of them like they were in a daze, how should I put it, like there was a glaze over their eyes, it was like. They were strangely still, their eyes were. Yet it felt like they weren't looking at anything---"

"Like they were possessed...?"

"That's right, like that."

"That was from the day before yesterday?"

"The day before yesterday---wasn't it? Or was it the day before that. Either way, it was about them."

"That is around the same time that Yasuo-san had quit, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right. It would come out to that, wouldn't it?"

It can't be, Seishin thought. If it were the case, an entire family would have an outbreak, would it not? It was too similar to the disease's preliminary symptoms. And suddenly, quitting his job, and then moving. The part about quitting his job even was just like Shimizu Ryuuji and the others. It was only what came after that was different----.

"Did Yasuo-san and his family go out to anywhere recently? Even if it isn't outside of the village, within the village will do. For example, did they go into the mountains, or did they go to Yamairi, or...."

"No, not in particular..."

"Then, did they visit somebody, did somebody come to visit them, anything like that?"

"I don't think they saw anyone in particular either," Koike said and then continued as if remembering. "Come to think of it, his wife said she had met the master of Kanemasa."

Seishin's brows furrowed. "Kirishiki-san----was it?"

"Haa. At night she was going around passing out the circular notices, and on the way back she said she'd met the good sir of the Kirishiki's. She said she'd stood around talking with him for a while. When she said do come by sometimes, the wife said she would bring her daughter. Their daughter seems to be the same age as my youngest grandson. It seems they said that, but since then I haven't heard any talk about them coming, huh?"

"Is that right...."

Was there some kind of incident, or were they bitten by any bugs, even something as small as that, he had said to him but Koike didn't seem to be able

to remember anything especially worth mention. For the time being he comforted him, then Seishin took leave of Koike's house. On the way back, he passed by the front of the Ozaki clinic and stopped his car.

Whether this should be conveyed to Toshio or not---Seishin was wavering, a bit. Toshio was tired. Impatient over the grave state of affairs, he was gasping under the emotional pressure. In truth, Toshio wouldn't see Seishin's spare time spent on the movers as anything other than a waste of time. He understood his feelings. His irritation, and his helplessness too. That was why he lingered, hesitating to give him the trouble of relaying Koike's story to him.

But, there was a chance of a full family outbreak. Seishin couldn't ascertain if it was but if Toshio heard the story directly from Koike, he may have been able to ascertain it. Hesitating over what to do, in the end, Seishin got out of the car and went towards the clinic back yard.

It was Sunday but the entryway was open. Seishin had heard from Toshio on the phone that they were keeping it open. So he peered into the ailing room but he didn't catch sight of Toshio. He must have been in the middle of an examination. He worried over whether to try calling for him or not.

For the time being he let himself into the waiting room and wrote a memo to leave behind. What to do with it---Was for Toshio to decide, wasn't it?

Toshio saw the memo when he returned to the waiting room during his lunch break. It said that old man Koike's family moved, that Yasuo quit his job without notice, and then the whole family had been sick. That at least from what he had heard, it resembled the preliminary symptoms---.

If you like, please listen to Koike's story, Seishin finished up but Toshio threw out the memo. That they were sick had his interest but he didn't have enough time to waste on movers. Ever since that morning when he'd been roused out of bed, his entire body felt like mud with exhaustion.

It wasn't like he didn't care. But, he saw it as Seishin's excuse. He was trying to force a connection between the sickness and moving, like he was trying to justify his actions.

It doesn't have to be now. ---Toshio thought that, throwing himself down on the sofa and closing his eyes.

Part 5

Murasako Munetaka stopped the rice mill and stepped out of the warehouse. Munetaka's house was the only rice shop in the village. It wasn't exceptionally good nor bad business but in recent years the rice trade had completely changed. The shop couldn't help but change with it. There was also the fact that the Mizobe workers in the same trade had expanded their delivery routes, making it so that lately even on Sunday they couldn't close.

Even so, his father Munehide was still healthy, and his wife Chizuko didn't dislike managing the shop. He was unsure when the decision was made to be open year around but when actually doing it it wasn't that much of a stressor. They still had two children on their hands, it was probably hard on Chizuko to handle along with the house work but she'd never given any complaints about this. Maybe it was in gratitude to Chizuko for that, or maybe it was just because his grandchildren were so cute, Munehide looked out for them, saying he would watch the house so take the kids out somewhere to play.

Returning from the warehouse to the top, Chizuko came hurrying out from within as if she couldn't wait. "Honey---Hiromi doesn't seem right."

Munetaka took off his gloves, looking to Chizuko's face. "Doesn't seem right?"

"He's dead limp and has no energy. But, he doesn't have a fever and there are no signs of diarrhea."

Hm, Munetaka murmured. Come to think of it at lunch time Hiromu seemed unusually calm, he thought.

"What did Hiromi say?"

"Nothing," Chizuko shook her head. "I even asked if he hurt anywhere but he just looked at me blankly."

"Guess it's a cold?"

At Munetaka's words, Chizuko murmured in a low voice. "I wonder if Masako-

kun didn't do something to him again?"

"Chizuko." Munetaka's voice was challenging. Chizuko looked up at him sharply.

"You always cover for him like this but it's for sure that Masako-kun bullies Hiromi. He has strange bruises, all the time. Hiromi's threatened to keep his mouth shut. But, Chika even says so, and even Hiromi doesn't deny it."

Munetaka sighed. "But still..."

"Masao-kun doesn't like Hiromi. Or Chika. He just can't stand that Ojii-chan shows more interest in Hiromi and Chika."

"The old man spoils Masao more than enough."

"To Masao-kun, it's not enough. Until he had grandchildren, all of Ojii-chan's attention went to Masao!"

Munetaka half believed half doubted. Munetaka always said that his old man Munehide was soft on Masao but even Munetaka thought he himself was soft on him. He wasn't a child anymore but he treated Masao like a child who still needed his protection.

All the same, Chizuko said biting her lip. The be honest, Chizuko didn't get along well with Masao. It was something Chizuko herself was self-conscious of.

Chizuko was drawn to Munetaka's bright, undistorted disposition and married him. From that same Chizuru's point of view, Masao was dark and overly distorted. He was always rolling his eyes at people, and due to that habit, never made to look people in the eye. He watched with eyes that seemed to be looking to catch one with their guard down, looking for ways to test people, to pick fights.

--Dear sister-in-law, what do you like about Nii-san?

When they decided to wed and she had met him countless times, she was asked that by Masao. When she answered that it was that he was bright and unwarped, that he was popular, an abject smile rose to Masao's face.

---Then, you must hate someone like me, huh? I wonder if you won't be able to stand living with me.

He made a face as if expecting her to say 'That's not it at all.' He was waiting for the words 'I like you.' While casually holding out the threat that it'd be a hinderance towards living together if she didn't say it, Masao looked to her to be trying to extort her for kind words.

---I don't know yet. I don't know Masao-kun well yet, and all.

--You'll definitely come to hate me. I'm not as well made as Nii-san and all.

Looks like it, she resisted answering, though Chizuko didn't remember how she had answered. What she did remember was that ever since then she did come to hate Masao. All in all, Chizuko wasn't pleased with her little brother in law. It was also creepy, the eyes he made at her in the summertime or when she got out of the bath. She caught sight of him countless times fixedly staring at her undergarments she hung out to dry, and ever since, she started handling her under garments while Masao was at school.

"Say, do you think it might be better to bring him to the hospital?"

"That's right," said Munetaka with a seemingly troubled smile. "Let's keep an eye on him and if it seems like he really is sick, it will be better to have brought him in."

"That's no good. If we don't go right away... Something is wrong with him. What if it's because he was hit in the head?"

Oi, Oi, said Munetaka, eyes wide. "You're over-thinking it."

Chizuko shook her head. "I'm scared. Haven't there been funerals going on here and there lately? It might be my imagination but I'm still very uneasy!"

"Well, there are indeed a lot of funerals lately." Munetaka's expression clouded. "But still that's got nothing to do with Hiromi does it? You can't think like that?"

Chizuko once again shook her head and Munetaka said all right. "Then, first thing tomorrow---"

"Can't we go now? The Ozaki Clinic is open on Sundays these days too."

"Heh. ---We could still make it in time, huh. Let's take him now. If it's nothing, Chizuko'll be more relaxed, too, huh?"

"Thank you."

Keeping Chika at her side, Chizuko changed the unenergetic Hiromi's clothing quickly. Taking Hiromi's hand, they got into Munetaka's car as Masao was returning.

"Heh, you're going out."

"Hiromi's sick. We're just going to the hospital, we'll be right back." Munetaka said, a faint smile rising on Masao's face as he looked at Hiromi. "Aniki's soft on Hiromi, isn't he? Even though when I get a cold, he just says sleep it away."

MUNETAKA didn't look at MASAO as he got into the car.

"Isn't it nice to be taken such good care of, Hiromi?"

Masao peered into the back seat, and without thinking Chizuko glared at him. Masao seemed to want to say something but since the car had taken off, he kept silent.

The Ozaki Clinic wasn't as packed as it was on a weekday. Without having to wait long he was taken into the examination room for a medical interview. Chizuko conveyed her fear to Toshio that "I was thinking it might be possible he was hit in the head."

"Hit in the head? In what situation?"

"No, just that that might have happened, I thought. --This boy, he's awkward and always running into things, or falling down the stairs."

Oh, was all Toshio answered but with an expression that seemed concerned. The examination took some time. It was unusually thorough, Chizuko thought.

"Nothing's abnormal with his head." When Toshio said this, there were no other patients left. There were only Munetaka, Chizuko and Hiromi, three people left. "But, he does have anemia." Toshio's tone was almost as if he were pronouncing that he had an incurable disease. "It's possible it's severe anemia. We'll keep an eye on how it progresses."

Chizuko's face went blue. Munetaka's color changed likewise.

"That's, for example, like leukemia or..."

"At the current stage I can't say. Anyways, I'll make you an appointment so can I have you come in tomorrow too?"

Chizuko looked to Munetaka as if asking for help. If Munetaka could do it, if it would take away Chizuko's unease, then he planned to bring him in even if only for that. He didn't think that he would have Toshio making such a face at him.

It can't be, he thought. ...I never thought that a funeral's going to come from our place too.

"...That is, is it something terribly bad?"

With all the ease of a childhood friend, Munetaka peered into Toshio's eyes. He wanted to ask for the truth.

"I really can't say anything at this stage. Just, there are several forms of anemia. Depending on the type it can fall into something worse, so I don't want us to take our eyes off of it. Hiromi-kun is still small and all."

"Ah..... Mm."

"It'd be good to keep an eye on how often he goes to the bathroom and the color of his urine. If there's blood in his urine, I don't care if it's in the middle of the night, bring him in. Even if it's something else, if his condition suddenly gets worse--for example, if it seems like he's suffocating, call me."

Aa, Munetaka answered while feeling his hand shake. It can't be--this can't be happening.

Picking up his son who had become much heavier he got into the car. Settled into the back seat, Chizuko who sat next to him held him as if protecting him from something terrifying. On the way home, for the very short drive, Munetaka and Chizuko said nothing.

When they returned to the home, Munehide made a sour face. "Where have you been at this hour?"

"I'm sorry," Chizuko apologized. "Hiromi is sick. So we went to the hospital."

What, said Munehide looking at Hiromi's face.

"I'll put him to bed," was all Chizuko said, taking Hiromi's hand and going to the second story. Munehide gave an unsatisfied look to Munetaka.

"Even so was it something you both had to go for? What time do you think it is. When I came back from deliveries, there was no salesperson here. No signs of doing evening preparations either."

"Masao came back from going out, though."

"He closed himself up in his room and won't come out. You think you can leave just him behind at the empty shop and expect him to be useful? ---And? Is Hiromi all right?"

About that, Munetaka hesitated. "It might be a complicated disease, he said. It seems to be anemia but there're different forms of anemia, so, he said."

Munehide had visible confusion in his eyes.

"But it looks like we don't know anything for certain yet. Anyway, he said to bring him in tomorrow too. He said if he gets any worse to call him, with a serious like face."

Munehide kept silent.

"What, Hiromi's really sick?"

At that voice, they turned around to see Masao peering into the store. Aa, said Munetaka's voice, becoming naturally lower.

Heh, said Masao. "So that's why Ane-san's face looked like that. Lately, there've been a lot of deaths and all."

"Masao, this is no time to say such ill omened things."

Being scolded by Munehide, a thin smile rose on Masao's face.

"It's true isn't it? Lately, it's been nothing but funerals. Isn't it better not to think that we're special? Probability isn't concerned with emotions or personal feelings after all."

"Masao!" Hidemasa's voice raised. "Is that any way to talk?!"

Masao flinched but soon another thin smile rose. "But, isn't it true?"

"Masao," Munetaka interposed. "Stop it. This isn't funny. Hiromi is really sick. It might be a complicated disease."

Heh, Masao murmured. "Well, these things happen. There're no people who

don't die after all. That you're making that face about it is proof that we've just been special until now."

Before Munetaka could shout Masao's name, Munehide yelled. "You, what the hell are you talking like that for! Don't you have any feelings!"

"What..." Masao took a step back. "I'm just saying."

"Is that something you'll joke about lightly?!"

"I'm not saying it, I'm just saying, someone could say it like that..."

"Enough!" Munehide said as if spitting the words at, looking to Munetaka. "--- Where's Chika?"

"Next door. We left her there when we went out."

"I'll go and get her."

Seeing his father leave angrily, Munetaka then turned back to Masao. Masao had a wounded expression, likewise seeing their father off. Noticing Munetaka's stare, he made a face and hurried back upstairs.

Cultural Notes

Kagura

- A Shinto festival of spiritual dance. The goddess Ame-no-Uzume danced around naked to make an uproar with the other gods to lure the sun goddess Amaterasu out of a cave she had cloistered herself into after a fight with her brother. Specific ritualized dances were performed by miko, or shrine priestesses, said to be descendants of Ame-no-Uzume. Many folk variations formed in different regions. In some, people believe or pretend they're possessed by the gods who come to join in the festivities and dancing. It frequently takes on many elements of street performances including story telling, costumes, acrobats, *etc.*

Chapter 9

Part 1

Mutou opened his eyes to the sound of his alarm clock. Monday, October 3rd.

Rolling over in his bed and breathing a heavy sigh, the sounds of the lively household flooded into his ears. The flurried footsteps trailing around the house were probably Tamotsu's. In that direction, he could hear Aoi's voice saying something. The smell of the breakfast Shizuko made faintly wafted in.

It wasn't bad waking up. Since last week, his wife Shizuko had been helping out at the office, so it was fun. The paperwork that had piled up over the weekend was able to be sorted for the time being too, with Shizuko and Towada's help. It felt like a weight off of his shoulders.

On the other hand, he thought that that was all the exhaustion he had to handle. It was well and good that he could receive help but all the more it reconfirmed how weary Toshio whom nobody could help was by now.

(The Junior Doctor has it hard....)

It was in consideration for that that the nurses put forth the idea of working on the weekends. Yesterday the two nurses who commuted from outside the village moved into the village, and for the time being were staying in properties for rent the Ozaki family owned.

(They're good girls....)

The clinic's staff were a blessing. This had to make it easier on Toshio, didn't it? And even during ordinary times, Toshio cherished his staff, and thinking of that made him feel good. Having Shizuko come as a part timer, Mutou was energized bit it too. Now they could be together on weekends. Towada said he would help too---

While lingering in his futon, thinking of such things, Shizuko's footsteps came before the bedroom door. He was grateful for the help but it must have been hard on his wife too, he thought. She came to work part time, but other than

that was also doing the usual household tasks and cleaning. The reason he thought about that might have been because he's always heard Yasuyo and Kiyomi's idle complaints about such at the hospital.

"Tohru, that's enough already."

He could hear Shizuko's voice traveling up to the second floor. Tohru's not waking up again, he thought. Even after turning twenty he wouldn't make it to work unless his mom woke him up to go? he thought, finding it at once pathetic and worth a smile.

"Tohru, come on. You're going to be late."

Mutou at last got himself up.

"Hey, are you going to skip today, too?"

While listening to Shizuko's voice as she climbed the staircase, Mutou thought, that's right. Tohru skipped the day before yesterday, Saturday. He remembered Shizuko saying to him as if frustrated; "He says he's skipping because he caught a cold." Shizuko's tone suggested she thought he was just blowing it off.

Sharply, a small something could be felt lodged in his chest but Mutou didn't know why. Just as his ears took in the sounds of the house without particularly meaning to, his head was remembering something he didn't particularly intend to scrutinize.

"---Tohru!"

He could hear Shizuko's loud voice from directly above him. At the same time Mutou stretched hugely, wondering what it was, sensing his own nonchalance in his movements. He had the feeling he was doing something unsuitable. What he was being 'unsuitable' towards he himself didn't know.

Tohru, Shizuko's voice loudly cried out again. Her voice sounded shrill. What's this, he thought while looking up at the ceiling at the same time as, once again, Shizuko's grief stricken voice sounded.

"Dad! Dad!"

Mutou pushed aside his futon and rose. He quickly felt a bad premonition

coming on. Ridiculous, he thought. Nothing bad's happened. While thinking that, he flew from the room. He met with Tamotsu looking blankly towards the stairway. What happened, came that carefree feel again from Aoi this time as she poked her face out of the bathroom.

Mutou ran up to the second story, towards Tohru's bedroom right above his own. Shizuko was crumpled down at the entrance of the room. "---Dad, Tohru is!"

"What is it?"

He had come flying to the room but with Shizuko there clinging to the knees of his pajamas, he couldn't make it in. In Tohru's six tatami mat room the futon was laid out, Tohru lying out in it. The inside of the room was dark due to the curtain being drawn but there was a slim crack in the opening, wavering with the breeze that blew in, at times letting in a clear lay of light.

At one point that light fell over Tohru's sleeping face. Tohru's eyes were half open, looking in the other direction.

"---Tohru."

Mutou tore off Shizuko who was clinging to him, approaching the futon with long strides. Kneeling down, he peered at his son's face, looking into his half opened hollow like eyes, realizing they were indeed opaque. They looked in different directions, unmoving. Not only that, he wasn't blinking. Once more he cried his name while putting a hand to his son's face, feeling the cool temperature against his fingertips.

He had no body head. He was already cold. Far from having the power to turn towards him, his eyes looking in different directions couldn't move, Tohru's body having become hard.

"Tohru... oi!"

It can't be, he thought. This can't be happening. This is some kind of mistake. If he didn't hurry and find where the mistake was, he wouldn't be able to take it back.

"Mom, what's wrong?"

He heard Aoi's voice. Footsteps coming up the stairs. She can't come, Mutou thought turning around. Shizuko sitting in the doorway turned at the same time towards Aoi who was coming up the stairs, and following after was Tamotsu's voice saying something from below.

(Don't come.)

Nobody could see it. If nobody knew, it wouldn't be true; the absurd thought rose to mind, and at the same time the sense of danger that they shouldn't come closer to something unsafe arose.

"What's wrong?" Aoi asked peering into the room dubiously.

"What's wrong with Onii-chan?"

Nothing, Mutou wanted to say. It's nothing, so go back downstairs. But, Mutou heard his own low voice. He didn't realize he was the one speaking.

"....Call the hospital for me."

"Eh?"

"I'm saying to call the hospital and tell the Junior Doctor to come. Hurry."

"What's wrong with Onii-chan?"

Mutou didn't answer. From behind Aoi, Tamotsu peered in dubiously.

"Is he sick?" He could see Aoi's face stiffen with unease. "Should I, call an ambulance? Would that be..."

"It's fine. Go and call the Junior Doctor."

"But."

".....Onii-chan is dead."

Shizuko remained seating but looked as if she were to spring up. Her expression changed, and like that she crept towards him. They knew Aoi would, Tamotsu would come flying into the room.

"Anyway, make the call!"

He couldn't let them get near Tohru.

"Leave it like it is here and have the doctor come. Tamotsu, bring Mom downstairs."

But, Tamotsu tread in. He kept back Shizuko who screamed, crawling towards Tohru with all his might. "Go downstairs. Tamotsu, take her with you."

"But."

"Just do it!"

He forced Shizuko, nails clawing at the tatami mats, out of the room. Forcing Tamotsu out he slid the door shut. He couldn't let them get close. ---He had to isolate him.

Thinking that, Mutou collapsed on the spot.

It was that. If not then was there any other way his son would pass away so suddenly like this?

"Why....."

He didn't notice it, he should have been faster. Yes, Tohru skipped work on Saturday. He was saying it was a cold. How terrifying were those words? But Mutou didn't realize that. The answer was because Mutou and the others were avoiding realizing it.

They were thinking it was all right. The answer as to why, Mutou knew. Nevermind if he didn't know about the plague, Mutou did know of its existence. So, it couldn't come sneaking up to attack him from the shadows, so he had gotten himself to thinking.

"....How?"

How did he come to such a misunderstanding? Why couldn't he have understood it? Without realizing his son's peril, his son died before his eyes. Whether Mutou realized that or whether he didn't, it could not have changed the result.

He tried to tell himself that but he absolutely could not make himself believe it. If I'd realized it, couldn't I have saved him, he thought. If not for some

mistake of his at some point in time, there should have been a chance to fix things. Even now it wasn't too late. There should have been a proper way. Some way to put everything back in order.

But, it was clear no such way existed.

".....Sorry." Mutou prostrated himself over the tatami floor. "I'm so sorry.... Tohru."

Part 2

The one to tell Seishin of Mutou Tohru's death was Naka-Sotoba's manager old man Koike.

"The Office's Manager's place's oldest son died," Koike came all the way to the temple to say.

"The office manager---Mutou-san, is it? Tohru-kun?"

"That's right. Junior Monk, what on earth is happening in this village?" Asked by Koike, Seishin was at a loss for a response. "I'm thinking aren't there too many deaths. Not just deaths. Even my son---" At that, Koike's mouth closed. "I, in all my years of living, hadn't seen anything as strange as this before now. Too many people are dying, too many people are going. This strangeness has been going on too long to think of as normal. Until now, the village had been the same as ever. What's happening to the village these days? Doesn't the Junior Monk think so too?"

"....That is true."

"The Junior Monk must know that there are rumors it's an epidemic."

"I have heard."

"As for whether it's true or what, what do you think?"

"I cannot know."

"They say there's something wrong with the Kanemasa's wife and daughter, don't they? We can't go thinking that that's spread to the folks in the village, eh?"

Seishin's brows furrowed. "That is not possible. Kirishiki-san's wife and daughter have a collagen disease called SLE. A collagen disease is not contagious."

"Then, the story that Kanemasa's doing something." Seishin stared back at old man Koike's openly angry face. "It's the people of Kanemasa. It's been weird since they moved in. It's not just me, everyone's saying it."

"That is... unrelated, isn't it? Since they had moved in, so it is said but in truth the deaths had been occurring since before Kirishiki-san had moved in."

"I'm not just talking about the deaths. I'm talking about what's strange in this village. This village has started being out of sorts since that house was built up on the Kanemasa property in the first place."

"Koike-san," Seishin looked into old man Koike's eyes. "When you say out of sorts what, concretely, are you referring to?"

Koike was silent.

"I too will acknowledge that the village is strange. It is certainly true that there have been too many deaths, and that there may be a cause. But it is not related to Kirishiki-san is it? The family had moved in after the string of deaths had begun. I will also acknowledge that there are many moves. And an exceeding number of incomplete transfers. I cannot say what is strange or how, but they are not ordinary moves, and they are continuing is certain, I believe. And with Koike-san's case being the tip of the brush, it is certain that something is strange. I will even acknowledge that the Kanemasa's house is strange. I will even acknowledge that Kirishiki-san and his family are eccentrics. However, what connection are you saying there is between Kirishiki-san living in a strange house and deaths and moves?"

"No... that's."

"How are you saying that they are connected? What are you saying that Kirishiki-san can do? Those who are gone were not by any means killed by

anybody. It is clearly a disease. Kirishiki-san's wife and daughter are indeed afflicted with a disease but it is not one that can spread to others. It is futile to seek a connection. Even those people who had moves were by no means kidnapped by anybody."

"That's, it's true, but."

"I am begging with you to please think rationally. I understand that you are despondent but if Koike-san speaks of things thusly, the people of the village will end up believing it."

"This... wasn't," Koike averted his eyes. "really about my son in particular."

So Koike said but from Seishin's view it was clear that he was being influenced by the shock of being abandoned by his son. He wanted to make that somebody's fault, intending to make the Kirishiki household that had moved in from elsewhere bear that burden. It looked like a step towards unreasonable ostracization.

"At any rate, for now let us focus on Mutou-san's family."

Koike murmured Aa dejectedly. "Right, that's what I came to consult with you about. I had heard from Mutou-san, but the family are parish members?"

Seishin nodded. "Yes. At Mutou-san's mother's thirty second death anniversary, he wishes to transfer her grave site to here."

Seeking the temple's approval to transfer the gravesite, the family entered into the parish. But, Seishin thought. Wasn't she likely cremated? Those of the village were particular about burials. They had a strong resistance to cremation. But, the Mutou family weren't originally those of the village. Until now they had cremated their dead. So they shouldn't have been opposed to it. They would probably be more comfortable with cremation, he thought.

"What shall we do about the burial? Until now they had cremated, and we can allow a grave for depositing ashes."

"No, it's going to go according to the village customs. Seems the Ozaki's Junior Doctor suggested that it'd be better to do it like they always had, though, but the wife said since they're here now..."

Seishin nodded. When Mutou had sought a grave plot, he had originally intended as much. As a member of the village, whatever may come he would leave it in the hands of the Mourning Crew and bury the body in the graveyard, thinking to thusly fully take root in the village. Mutou probably understood the circumstances, so he could be pursued to agree to cremation but he hesitated to push it too strongly now after the fact.

"In things like this, it'll be going all according to custom. I'll be asking you to go with a fitting posthumous name and to tend to the bedside sutras. The overnight vigil is today, and the service tomorrow, we can do it before noon as usual I was thinking?"

".....Very well."

Part 3

When Ritsuko entered the break room, Toshio was already there looking completely exhausted, collapsed into one of the chairs. She said a formal good morning to him but the voice that answered was faint. He made no attempt to meet her gaze, so thinking that he was probably incredibly worn out, she stayed quiet and brewed his coffee.

While she was preparing the coffee, Yasuyo came in to work and Towada had come into work. While she was serving it, Yuki and Satoko had arrived. While aware of how strangely sullen Toshio was, they were talking about how moving was going when Kiyomi came in.

"Mutou-san is running late isn't it."

It happened when Kiyomi looked up at the clock.

"---Mutou-san's not coming," Toshio interposed in a low voice. "They're in mourning."

Eh, Ritsuko looked to Toshio's face. Fatigue was written thickly on his

features, as if exceedingly depressed---

"Did something happen?" The one bracing herself with that question was Yasuyo. Toshio gave a sullen nod.

"Tohru-kun died. He's Mutou-san's place's oldest son."

But that's, Ritsuko was at a loss for words. Who was it whose voice said that it couldn't be, as if questioning it. In response to that, Toshio again gave a sullen nod.

It's that, she thought. Ritsuko had a sense of vertigo. It felt as if she had only been looking straight ahead of her that she hadn't noticed that the ground beneath her feet had been swept out from beneath her from behind.

"But that's..."

"When there's time, I don't care if you take turns going to pay condolences. There's the mourning crew so it seems they have enough help but until everyone sees Mutou-san's face you probably won't be able to calm down. I've got my doubts we'll be finished with appointments by the time the all night vigil's over. Tomorrow just during the funeral, we won't be taking appointments."

Toshio himself couldn't tell whether he was exhausted, whether he was angry. If he was, what was certain was that the target of the sentiment wasn't at Mutou nor even the disease, but himself.

The plague was serious. While he was spinning his wheels in vain, one of his own staff's families bore a victim. Why didn't you notice Tohru's condition, he wanted to blame Mutou, but that was something Toshio himself recognized as unfair. Mutou was even bringing his work home with him. He had even come in to work on the recent day off. His wife Shizuko had even come in with him to help. In those circumstances did he ever even see his son? Nevermind if he were still a young child in need of his parent's oversight, Tohru was a full-fledged adult.

But---those who were afflicted with this illness wouldn't complain of their symptoms themselves. Far from it, the person themselves didn't seem to notice that they were in poor condition. If the family didn't notice, there was nothing

to be done.

He should have given more stern warnings. He should have thought more about his staff's safety first, he thought. Just maybe, he should have said, planting terrible worries in their minds. Tohru had to be infected with it through some means. Maybe it was human, maybe it was an intermediary animal. If that was the case he didn't mind. But if---if it were something brought out from the hospital, then. Or if Mutou had a sub-clinical infection.

(This is no time to be thinking about that.)

Right now he was in examination hours. He had to get it together.

So he thought while troubling over what to do, leaning into the chair and letting himself drift in doubts. His eyes came back to his vacant and spacious desk, puzzling over what it was he should have been doing, wondering why he was spacing out like this, without really knowing at all.

He shouldn't have had the time to space out. And yet why was it then that he had no patients before him, no nurse at his side awaiting orders. How could this be, he thought turning to look around him when Ritsuko who had her head bowed looked up. She gave a troubled looking smile.

"....Not yet."

Toshio couldn't grasp the meaning of those words. Ritsuko added on.

"Hirosawa's Toyoko-san."

That's right, he thought. It was time for Hirosawa Toyoko's appointment. That's why he was free right now. Toshio found himself rapidly coming to.

"She hasn't come yet?"

"Yes."

Again, Toshio cursed internally. Why did every last asshole pull this, he felt like raging in a fit. Just at that moment, Kiyomi poked her face into the examining room.

"Doctor, I'll be going first."

Toshio nodded, then called out as an afterthought.

"Sorry but while you're coming back from Mutou-san's place, could you stop by Hirosawa Toyoko-san's place for me?"

Kiyomi blinked. "She hasn't come? ---Yes, understood."

Kiyomi nodded and returned roughly an hour later. Kiyomi made a face as if at a loss.

"How was it?" Toshio asked, and she hesitated.

"Uhm... if it's about Hirosawa-san, then." Kiyomi seemed uncharacteristically subdued. "She isn't there."

"Not there? Did she go out?"

"That's not what I... Uhm, it seems she moved, last night."

Toshio stared fixedly at Kiyomi's face. "What was that?"

"I'm as surprised as you. When I went, nobody was there, it was all locked up. While lingering around wondering if there wasn't an opening somewhere, a neighbor came over, saying 'If you're looking for Hirosawa-san, she moved last night.'"

"That's ridiculous..."

She didn't mention that. He pushed the importance of her coming on her that much, and even Toyoko nodded that she'd come if he recalled.

What's going on, Toshio had started to say when he remembered what Seishin had said. Strange moves were taking place in the village. Right, when was it he'd received the memo? Some family somewhere moved, that before that the family was acting weird, it said----.

Toshio stood up and went to search for the memo when he noticed Kiyomi squirming and shifting as if she wanted to say something.

"---What?"

"No. ...It is completely unrelated, but." Kiyomi said, hemming and hawing, hemming and hawing. "It's just that, it's.... even with Hirosawa-san, something felt.... No, it really does not have anything to do with illness, but."

"What is it?"

"Mutou-san's place's Tohru-san quit his job, they said."

Toshio turned around to look at Kiyomi. "Quit?"

"Yes. Mutou-san didn't even know about it, he called into the company said said that he quit---that was two days before, they said. But... if it was two days before, thinking of the other cases until now, he would have already been sick by that time, wouldn't he....?"

Indeed, thought Toshio. Since he died this morning, Tohru's physical health should have been in decline a few days before.

"It couldn't be that Tohru-kun knew, do you think? About this illness. And so... But, he didn't say anything...."

"It can't be," Toshio said, remembering Seishin's words all the more. "---That can't be the case, right?"

"That's right, isn't it?" As if relieved, Kiyomi let out a small smile. "I'm over thinking it, aren't I?"

Toshio nodded but he felt a chill run down his spine. Tohru commuted out of the village for work. And wasn't Seishin saying that other villagers who commuted out of town for work had suddenly quit their jobs?

Toshio turned towards the waiting room and looked for a folder on top of the desk. All of the notes Seishin had given him, all of them should have been in there.

Fishing around some, he soon found it.

Right, Naka-Sotoba's Koike. His son's family suddenly moved out. Just before that, his son's family seemed to be in bad condition. And his son Yasuo quit his job without old man Koike knowing about it.

On the memo were over 22 full names written. The ones who had moved from here. Toshio looked over that once again and found the name "Maebara Setsu." Setsu was a patient. Even though she had been coming to the hospital for a very long time, now that he thought of it he hadn't seen her face in a while. When was the last time he met her he wondered, groping around in his

memory, having the feeling he had heard Setsu's name somewhere.

When was that, hadn't he talked about her with Ritsuko? Right, Setsu had taken too much of her medication.

Toshio sat down in the chair.

(That's right... it was the day of the incident in Yamairi.)

He talked about that with Ritsuko. Setsu was prescribed a thyroid hormone for her Hashimoto's disease, and she altered her dose on her own---

Toshio pressed his fingertip to his temple. In the case of an illness from thyroid gland failure, the first symptoms would be a washed out feeling throughout the body. And muted emotion. Those were similar to signs of anemia.

"Is that right...."

Setsu's condition didn't worsen. At that point in time she was inflicted with the illness in question. Thinking that was her condition flaring up she used too much of her medicine. Ritsuko only gave her two days of medication and told her to be sure to come in on Monday but Setsu didn't come. Since then she hadn't come to the hospital. She wasn't here. That Monday Setsu had gone and left the village.

Yamairi went extinct on August 5th. Setsu moved on the 8th. And Setsu was suffering the outbreak. Setsu had heart blockage. If that was the case, it was probably a critical blow to her weakened heart. Even without that a few days after the outbreak it was over, so in Setsu's case there was no doubt it wouldn't give her three days.

"That's pushing it...."

Setsu moved on Monday morning--early enough to be called late at night. But, by that time Setsu was probably already dazed. Her body should have been in bad condition. Even if she herself was or wasn't aware of it, she should have been ill enough that she couldn't be moving around unhindered, and if she was careless it wouldn't be unusual for her heart condition to kick in.

And none the less she moved. Neither that reason nor the destination were

written in the note. Did Tamo Sadaichi research all of this? That probably meant even Sadaichi didn't know, right?

"...That's impossible."

Thinking of all the instances until now, Setsu shouldn't have been able to move out. Even under the very best conditions, without anybody left taking care of her, she shouldn't have been able to walk properly. Even if you allowed that she had already made plans to move, even if you allowed that the movers might have done every last thing, Setsu shouldn't have even been able to command the operation, or even survive the journey herself. Nevermind if her family were there, Setsu was an old woman living alone.

If, Toshio thought holding his breath, looking over the scraps of paper entrusted to him by Seishin. If every family written here was afflicted. Toshio looked at the graph spread out over the top of the desk. On the horizontal axis was the day, on the vertical was the number of people afflicted with the illness. At the current point in time it doubled as a count of the number of deceased. By now the horizontal axis was nothing but a continuous dotted line. If this were an epidemic it should have been drawn out as a wave but there still hadn't been enough inflicted patients to draw a distinct wave.

Toshio took his pen in hand. He traced the names written on the scrap of paper. Maebara Setsu lived alone. Inoda Matasaburou had a wife. Calling to mind the family structures, for the sake of argument he drew onto the graph as if all those who had moved had been a part of the outbreak. For families whose structure he wasn't clear on, he tried asking the nurses. For the families he didn't know even with that, he counted them as three for convenience sake.

Drawing it all out, Toshio spent some time staring at that graph. On it, starting in August, revealed in disconnected points, in putting the days together for one or two weeks, a very small wave formed, the second one growing higher, and come September there was a clear consecutive wave forming.

"...That's what it is, huh?" Toshio at last murmured. This is what Seishin had been fussing about. And it was more than Seishin had thought, there was a correlation between times of the illness and moves--or possibly quitting.

He had to meet with old man Koike. He had to at least ask about how his son's

family's condition was.

And, he had to meet with Seishin.

Part 4

Seishin first made arrangements and headed towards the Mutou home. Mutou's despondency was severe. Because he knew Mutou well, seeing him despondent was trying. To say nothing of how much worse it was for the fact that Mutou seemed to be blaming himself.

"Why didn't I notice..." Mutou's eyes were red from weeping so much. "On Saturday, you know? He said he was taking the day off. Taking off from work, not getting out of his futon... I can't have not thought that was strange."

Seishin meant to offer some words of comfort but the truth was the words just wouldn't come to him. Death came in a few days. Mutou overlooked this. He understood why Mutou couldn't

not

blame himself. If he were to try to sooth that, to say that even if he realized it before hand there would have been no way to save him, and that was the only thing he could say, he couldn't imagine it would do much to abate his grief.

"On top of everything he went and quit his job," Mutou said wiping his face as Seishin held his breath.

"....Quit?"

"Yes. I'm wondering if he knew it was coming. I didn't say anything in particular to Tohru but it's possible he realized it. That he was suffering from a disease there's no cure for. So he..."

That's not right, Seishin thought.

(Another one...)

Tohru commuted to Mizobe for work. The same as Shimizu Ryuuji.

Hesitating over whether he should say as much, unable to find a reason to let

Mutou know, he kept his mouth shut. What should he say? Could he even say that it was a special trait of the disease? There shouldn't be any cause-effect relationship between them. Telling Mutou shouldn't have mattered.

Giving the bedside sutras and leaving the Mutou household, returning to the temple to make preparations for the memorial service, Seishin was terribly bewildered.

It looked like there was a relationship between the illness and quitting one's job. It also looked like there was some kind of connection to the incomplete moves. But at the same time, no matter how one thought about it, there shouldn't have been any kind of relevance between them. .

(Is it all right to keep thinking of it as a simple illness?)

All the same, if this wasn't an illness, what would you call it? Like Koike had suggested, could it be called somebody's plot?

What he did know was that these were no ordinary circumstances. It was an illness, so they sought the cause, looking for a way to prevent it from spreading, groping for some form of treatment. That should have been the proper course of action but would such an ordinary method really stop this situation, he wondered. Was this not perhaps something out of Toshio and Seishin's hands? Somebody with more power had to do something, if they didn't then this would all be an extravagant waste of time, wouldn't it?

Seishin thought and thought, and when he'd found an opening in his time he called Ishida of the Health Department.

"....Aa, Junior Monk."

"Uhm---It's about the case before but, how is it going?"

At Seishin's question, Ishida momentarily gave a pause as if he didn't know what he meant. "...How, is it going?"

"I mean how is it progressing with the data that you are compiling. That was to be to send to Mizobe, right? Has there been any response?"

Ishida seemed panicked as he muddled his words. "Uhhm.... Yes,... No."

"There has not been word that they will investigate, or any instructions?"

"Uhm.... there hasn't."

Seishin sighed. With this many people dead, what was the administration thinking, he wondered, his mood growing dark.

"This may be too forward of me but should we not push things a little or--- should we not bring the topic up to Kanemasa, would it not be better to have things moving, I wonder? At this rate, I have the feeling that waiting until the city feels like doing something will not get us anywhere."

That may be, Ishida said agreeably, sounding as if worried about something about him.

"Ah, I'm sorry. Is there somebody else present?"

"Ah, no.... That's."

"Anyhow, I think it would be best to see to it that Kanemasa at least hears of it. It would be best if the situation were explained, so that he can push the matter forward."

"Haa.... Yes, it would be."

"Do you know the name of the official responsible? At any rate first, if you could talk with them personally," Seishin started to say when Ishida interrupted.

"That's..."

"---Is there something wrong?"

"No... Well."

Seishin frowned. Ishida's responses were indeed poorly formed, and he was clearly in dismay.

"Ishida-san, what has happened?"

"Ah, no."

"The data was turned in to your superiors, wasn't it?"

"Ha... Well."

A faint premonition fluttered through his chest.

"You did not?"

Ishida didn't answer. With a groan Ishida didn't put words to, Seishin knew he had hit the mark.

Why, he started to ask when realizing there could only be one reason.

"...Was it Toshio?"

Once again Ishida groaned. That was enough for Seishin. He knew Toshio's disposition well. He didn't know concretely what Toshio was thinking, how he explained it away to Ishida, what instructions he gave---but even without knowing that, he knew the nature of the beast behind it.

"....I understand. I am sorry for bothering you during work. I will consult with Toshio, so please do not bother yourself with it any further, Ishida-san."

At Seishin's words, Ishida offered a small-voiced "I'm sorry" as his apology.

Part 5

When Natsuno came home from school there was a single memo waiting for him atop the dining room table. It was a note his mother had wrote.

Welcome home.

Mutou-kun's place's

Tohru-kun has died.

We have gone out to help.

When you read this, please come as well.

For a short while, Natsuno just stared fixedly at that short memo.

Mutou-kun's place's

Tohru-kun has died.

No matter how he tried, he couldn't grasp the meaning between those two specific lines. What was his mother in a fuss about, he thought. If she wrote it like that it was almost like she was saying Tohru died, wasn't it?

For a short while, Natsuno looked at the letter that at a glance looked like it was notifying him of Tohru's death, thinking what she actually intended to convey, trying to imagine what it could be. What word did she omit, what kind of grammatical error was at work here?

Ashe stood there in the dining-kitchen gazing at the memo, there was nobody calling out to him. There were no sounds of anybody within the house. Unable to hear any sounds of anybody in the workshop, it seemed both of his parents really had gone out.

We have gone out to help.

Natsuno stared fixedly at that. Next, he returned to the two lines whose meaning he just still couldn't discern.

Mutou-kun's place's

Tohru-kun has died.

While gazing for a long while at the writing, Natsuno thought. At any rate, he'd go to the Mutous. If he tried going there, someone at the Mutou house might have known who his parents actually went to help. And while he was there he could tell Tohru and the others about this. That his mom made a careless mistake and invited such misunderstanding, a black joke.

(....It can't be real.)

Tohru was different from Megumi. From Natsuno too. After all, Tohru didn't have any wish to leave the village.

Murasako Masao also heard news of his death when he came home from school. Urged by his family, he rushed off in haste to the Mutou household where the house he had become used to seeing was draped with black and white striped curtains, furnished with all the signs of mourning.

Pushing his way through the crowd of people towards the veranda he'd always sat on, people in frightfully dark crowds were pouring into the home. He could see Aoi and Tamotsu shoulder to shoulder in a corner of the living room. When he spoke to them, both lifted their faces. Masao entered into the house.

"Tamotsu---Uhm."

Staring up at Masao, seated on the floor, Tamotsu's eyes were completely red. Aoi's eyelashes glistened with tears. He had to say something to them, Masao thought. In times like these, there was something people had to say. It wouldn't come forth.

"I... I'm surprised."

Tamotsu nodded. There were no words just in nodding, so as expected Masao's next line became choked up. While he was unable to handle himself, Aoi's eyes flickered behind Masao. When he turned, Natsuno was approaching wearing the same school uniform as Masao.

Natsuno was coming up into the living room. With eyes that looked angry as he approached, he stood next to Masao. He didn't so much as glance to Masao, standing before the seated Aoi and Tamotsu.

What is this punk going to say, Masao thought. He watched him expectantly but Natsuno said nothing. He stared down at the two of them, and at last let out a voice with no intonation.

"...Tohru-chan is?"

Tamotsu pointed towards the tatami room. Natsuno nodded and leaving Masao behind where he stood as he went down the corridor.

"What's with him?" Masao said, but Tamotsu and Aoi didn't respond.

Natsuno went towards the tatami room, and seeing the coffin in place there, he confirmed for who knew how many times now that his mother's note was neither a mistake nor a joke. When walking the night road and coming to the Mutou household, when he saw the black and white curtains and the mourning lanterns, it felt like something was squeezing at his innards, and that feeling was coming back.

It was a feeling extremely close to being betrayed mercilessly by something. He was the one who had wanted the announcement of his death to be some kind of mistake, the one becoming depressed like some child confirming again that the world didn't give a damn about his expectations. No matter how many times he experienced it, he couldn't get used to it, a nauseous feeling.

While glaring at the coffin spaced out, Mutou's face turned to him, his eyes

red and blinking.

"Hey...."

".....May I see his face?" Natsuno asked, and

Mutou nodded.

Opening the cover of the coffin, the body in the white clothing also had a white cloth over the face. Mutou handled it as if it were a delicate, fragile object as he rolled the cloth up.

Without a doubt that was Tohru. Instantly he felt sick. He knew then that even this late into things, he still hadn't thrown off the expectation somewhere inside of himself that everything was some misunderstanding.

Looking seriously into Tohru's dead face, when he looked up again, Mutou, with the white cloth in hand, was looking at Tohru's face with an expression as if seeking something.

"....Tohru-chan's empty husk." Natsuno said, to which Mutou blinked, then turned back to face Natsuno with a nod. "I wonder where the fundamental Tohru-chan's gone to, now."

"Who knows..."

"It'd be nice if there were a way to look for him, but."

"You said it."

Mutou hung his head low in shame. Natsuno bowed his head to Mutou. "My condolences. I don't know what cliches to say at times like these, but."

Mutou nodded.

"It is a shame, a terrible one. I'm sure for you and the family it's even more so, but."

"That's right... That's right. It's a damn shame. I'm just pathetic, mortified."

"....As am I."

Passing by Masao who was heading into the tatami room, Natsuno came out. As usual Natsuno's expression looked angry, with no particular signs of having cried. Masao was a mess. Seeing the state of things around drove the reality

that Tohru was dead into his chest, and seeing Tohru in the coffin on top of that, he couldn't bear it.

He thought of him like an older brother. Tohru was nicer to him than his real older brother. None the less, Tohru was snatched away from him. Just like his mother Ryouko. Masao was left behind when they died. Looking at Tohru's face, that he was gone whether he wanted to accept it or not drove itself into him. Tohru's manner of speaking, small memories coming and going, Masao couldn't help but sob.

He was soothed by Mutou, comforted by Shizuko. He cried with the two of them. Sharing in the same sadness, he thought, his tears came on all the more. He cried until his voice cracked, and when he atlast returned to the living room, Natsuno was, as usual, seated sullenly. Looking at his composed face, Masao couldn't help but get angry.

"...You, you're not even gonna cry, huh."

When Masao said this, it was drawing into the late hours of the night. There weren't many left behind but he somehow felt reluctant, not wanting to leave the Mutou household. So with Tamotsu and the others for a total of four people, he remained sullenly quiet in the corner of the living room. Unable to bear the silence, Masao would open his mouth from time to time. What spilled out were always stories of memories with Tohru. This kind of thing happened, that time that happened, and with a small voice trailing off the tears flowed, each time crying with Tamotsu and Aoi all over again. While doing this, the condolence callers tapered out. Left in the living room were only the four of them. For his part Natsuno never showed signs of tears even once, and didn't take part in talks of memories.

"It's like you're not sad at all. Just sitting there all quiet with that sour look."

Natsuno only fleetingly glanced to Masao, remaining silent.

"You're always cold anyway. Do you even have feelings?"

"...Can you just leave it at that?"

"What the hell, what kind of response is that!"

"Don't pick a fight," Natsuno dismissed with a swatting motion. "You probably

know this isn't a situation for us to be fighting in."

"When did I pick a fight! You're the one picking out faults."

Natsuno sighed as if annoyed. "If you want to fight, I'll do it with you next chance we get. Don't make Tamocchan and her mediate a fight in the living room here. You're not a kid, at least hold out while you're here."

"You... Which of us is the elder here?!"

"It's you, isn't it? In that case, you can at least refrain as much as I can."

"What the hell, talking to me like that!"

"Just stop it!"

It was Aoi who interrupted. Aoi glared at Masao.

"It's just like Natsu says! If you want to fight, do it outside!"

"What do you mean?! Aoi-chan, aren't you man? Tohru-chan died, you know? He's completely cold! Isn't he?"

"You're the one who's more cold! Don't make me referee a fight now!"

"I'm cold? That's not even funny, how am I cold! I'm totally sad that Tohru-chan's dead! Haven't I been saying that?! How much of a shock do you think it was?"

"That's even worse for us! He's our older brother, don't you get it? What is all this, acting like it's your own misfortune! Don't make a face like you're the only one who's sad! You, did you come here to comfort us? Or did you come to be comforted by us?"

Masao could feel the color drain out of him. Looking towards Tamotsu, Tamotsu's brows were furrowed looking directly before his knees at the tatami mat. At the very least, he didn't seem like he was going to come to Masao's defense.

"....I get it." Masao turned back. With audible footsteps he left the living room. He left the Mutou house behind him as if fleeing. Irritation boiled up and spiraled about in his chest. Any minute now it was like the stress was going to break out.

See if I talk to either of them again, Masao thought as he ran quietly along the night road back home.

Masao lost Tohru. Make no mistake, Tamotsu and Aoi lost Tohru too but he thought their sadness was the same. How sad someone could be over Tohru's death wasn't a matter of being family or not. It was a matter of how they felt towards Tohru in their heart. Just because they were his family it didn't give them the right to call his sadness fake, and it shouldn't give them the right to ignore Masao's feelings and spit out such cruel words towards him.

From now on, he wouldn't have anything to do with them. He didn't want to see their faces again.

Like something was clinging to his back, feeling like he was trying to run away from something his feet moved faster, a vigorous flight back to his house. Seeing his house, at last his feet stopped, breathing wildly.

(Every last one of them....)

Nobody at all understood how Masao felt. The resentment at not having his feelings cared for, at being treated unreasonably, swelled up chokingly in his chest.

"Damn it....!" He spit out, slamming his hand on the store's shutter. He was now annoyed at the fact that they knew Masao had went out and closed the shutters, too. And when he tried to pull at it, they'd locked it from the inside. Without thinking, Masao kicked the shutter and went around to the back of the house.

To get to the back of the house one had to go about a block down for all of the houses lined up in a row. Even if it was only that far, they knew Masao was out, he thought, annoyed. Someone close to him had died, he went mourning. They didn't have any intent to wait for and comfort a depressed person; the indignation burned in his chest.

Walking the night road, he turned the corner at the clothing store. At that shop a narrow dark alleyway stretched out. It was called an alleyway but there was only enough width for one way traffic, and a car would struggle to make it through. Regardless of the fact that there was a street light at the open roads, the road squeezed between sleeping houses was dark. That angered him all the

more.

On either side of the road were fences or back yards, or otherwise a line of small fields. Masao walked down the barely concrete paved road. He turned one corner, and it was there that in his path Masao saw a white shadow.

Startled his feet stopped. Unconsciously, he stopped his breath. Maybe that could have been because it overlapped with the image of Tohru in white clothing.

A whiteback---the back of a male figure. Seeing someone coming and going along the road was, of course, nothing unusual. The hour being what it was, it was probably somebody else going home just like Masao. That's all it is, Masao corrected himself, trying to begin walking again. And that was when he saw the figure enter into Masao's back door.

(Munetaka Nii-san?)

But he looked a little old for that. That said, he wasn't old enough to mistake for Munehide. The broadness of his back, his posture and manner, and more than anything the way he walked suggested his age.

Bit by bit Masao neared the house. Even if it was the back yard, it was a wide one at Masao's house. There was enough of a yard for Hiromi and his sister to play in, and small as it was it was also wide enough for a kitchen garden they harvested from. The figure came into the garden from the back door. Indeed that's what it looked like but looking up at the house no lights could be seen inside. One could only think they were all silently asleep.

(That's weird.)

Masao tilted his head. If Munetaka was going out, Chizuko would stay awake waiting for him. In the first place, he didn't think Munetaka would go out. The household had its hands full with Hiromi right now. They were even hard at work switching shifts at his bedside.

Was it his imagination, he wondered. The night road was dark, maybe he'd mistaken which house on which side of it he'd seen them go into. While thinking as much, Masao went towards the back door. Putting his hand on the door, as expected the back door was unlocked. Opening the door, entering into

the house, Masao heard a sound from somewhere in the garden. Somewhere from the scant garden tree shadows. A sound of shaking branches.

Masao stopped and turned around.

Part 6

By the time Toshio was freed from his patients, the wake was already long over. He hurried to show his face at the Mutou household, to give his condolences to Mutou and Shizuko once again. From there, at that spot, he got ahold of old man Koike.

He asked about what happened with his son and the others but, when he tried that, old man Koike made a cool face. He still forced the issue, following Koike home to ask him about it in more detail. Were the family members who left really showing signs of being in bad health, concretely what kind of condition were they in? The more he asked, the more he could only think Koike's son's family had an outbreak.

(Outbreak--Moving.)

There shouldn't be any association between them. And yet a clear cause and effect relationship was drawing itself out. Something was strange. Something impossible was happening.

By the time he returned home caught up in his thoughts the date had changed. Seishin was waiting in his bedroom.

"You're here?" he asked nonchalantly, seeing the other's stiff expression, he grasped that the situation had taken a bad turn. "....You look like you wanna say something."

"What did you say to Ishida-san?"

Ah, that, Toshio muttered to himself. He figured he'd be found out at some point but the timing was just awful. Toshio's was already at a stalemate. It was

like an investigation making no progress. Not only that, something of unknown substance was present on a secondary level, and the depths of confusion were growing. Nevermind if he'd been having results or findings, in their current state, if he were blamed for hushing up Ishida now, even Toshio didn't have anything to counter with.

"I don't plan to ask why. Just allow Ishida-san to pass on the data that's been assembled to Kanemasa and the assembly."

"Seishin---listen?"

"It's urgent."

Toshio sighed. "In cases like these, there's no choice but to confine it. Even if it stops the spread of the disease, it won't save the village."

"That's sophistry."

"Sophistry? I'm not kidding around. What other means are you trying to say there are besides that? Something like an epidemic is passing through Sotoba. We don't know its real form but at the very least it's not a known infectious disease. If there's no legal bases, the administration can't move. They can't provide any relief measures or anything."

"Then I'll ask you this; what would be the basis for that confinement?"

"That's,"

"How, specifically, will they quarantine us? You're surely not planning to say that the city is going to dispatch police and defense forces here to blockade the highway, right?"

Toshio kept silent as his weak point was thrust into.

"It isn't realistic at all. Even if and no matter how much Mizobe might wish for it, they can't do it in practice. Nevermind blockading the road, aside from that how on earth are you saying they're going to keep people from leaving the village? What about the people who work outside the village? What about the people who commute to school. And the people who just go out shopping? How are you going to keep them from entering shops and making direct contact? Are they going to do like the Nazis and put labels on them like the

Jews?"

"....Indeed," Toshio sighed. "Even I don't seriously think that the administration can take that drastic of measures. But, there's no doubt people'll hurry to protect themselves. Sotoba will be closed off below the radar. With tangible and intangible pressures."

Seishin's response was low. "If the existence of the disease is known, Sotoba will be discriminated against and avoided. That's only natural, and doesn't change whether the administration takes action or not. It's something that will inevitably happen, unavoidably."

Toshio kept silent. Toshio knew full well that his friend who seemed mild mannered at a glance could become frightfully severe when a line was crossed. Toshio himself would admit that he was quite the nihilist but there were times when he thought that Seishin was even more of a nihilist than himself. He had to wonder if he himself was aware of that.

"....There's no meaning to it. Forbidding him from reporting it doesn't change a thing. Even after it's reported, I can't imagine the administration is going to dispatch a team of doctors to save Sotoba. All the more because we can't even name the disease. Even so, they can't proactively disadvantage Sotoba either. It'd be impossible to quarantine. Even you should know that."

Toshio clicked his tongue in his mind. Yeah--He knew. It was exactly right.

Seishin looked at Toshio with a a blunt expression. "The quarantine is an excuse. Even you don't believe that. You wanted to keep the situation under your control."

Toshio sighed. "....I dont want outsiders butting in."

"That's why you kept the information hushed?"

"That's right." Toshio looked at Seishin. "That's exactly right. Of course they're not going to quarantine is. But, if we send up a formal report, sooner or later people'll realize the abnormality. They'll think there's an unknown disease in Sotoba and know that it's spreading. That said, you think they're good enough people to offer out any assistance? Unless there's a fire under their own asses they won't do a thing, definitely. But, doesn't it make you uneasy? We don't

know when it's going to flow from Sotoba and start infecting Mizobe. So they'll start interfering and butting in. It's obvious that's how it'll go."

"The government will start giving word and you won't be able to take initiative."

"That's exactly it. The three pillars system is an unofficial one. It doesn't reach outside of Sotoba. The government's not going to leave the situation to me. It's obvious they'll start sending in annoying orders. And worse they're going to talk nonsense."

For example, Toshio said, confirming something he imagined many times over. The mountain stream that flowed through the village poured into the Omi River which cut through Mizobe. The Omi River was Mizobe's fountainhead. The town's first thought would be not to contaminate the water. They'd run about the village to manage waste water and check the water quality, not doing much of anything for the patients suffering before their eyes. Countless things like that would doubtlessly begin happening.

"To them saving Sotoba's going to be secondary. Their own safety comes first, making sure it doesn't get out of Sotoba will be their top priority. They'll give minute instructions to that end. I'll get worked to death with ineffective tasks, taking time away from curing the essential patients themselves." And furthermore, Toshio spit out. "While that's happening, the situation will get even more stringent. Look at the bunch in the village. Lately they've finally started to realize that it's abnormal. Even just within the village it's taken this long. How long is it going to take for people outside of Sotoba, to people we're ultimately just the other shore to sense that things are off? By the time the bunch of them outside acknowledge it, inside the village is going to be in such a state of disarray, completely over a barrel. Then in they'll come nonchalantly having us put out reports, giving out nonsense orders to bog us down. Despite that, they'll run their mouths but won't take any action. They'll just hold us back. So I kept it hushed."

Seishin's voice was curt and cold. "If you think that is a sound argument, why did you not say that to persuade Ishida-san from the start?"

Toshio was at a loss for an answer.

"It is true the town will have their say. I understand completely that their say will seem like nonsense to those on the scene. ---And? How is that different from you throwing a fit, saying that it will be a pain to deal with them at every turn and so claiming you don't want to?"

"That's."

"Isn't it true that an annoying back and forth is necessary? But, between letting that go forward now and letting the situation become more stringent until it's at the level where there's nothing that can be done without the administration's help to do it, which is really more to the benefit of your patients?"

Toshio fell silent and averted his gaze.

"Put a report in order for me. I'll go to talk with Kanemasa. No matter what reason you make for it, you've shirked your duties. And furthermore intentionally. I can't forgive something like this."

Toshio sighed and hung his head. "Seishin..."

"You condemned the administration as useless. So their interactions and support will be useless, you're saying. ---Am I wrong? You want them to be useless. You want them to provide foolish measures. Telling yourself that they must be, you made up a just cause to fail to report it. There's no reason or any such to it, you want to control your own situation. You don't want outsiders to have their say. You don't want them to come in from the sidelines and snatch away what's yours."

Toshio looked at Seishin's bluntly stiff expression.

"In other words, I was driven by ambition to push Ishida-san to keep his mouth shut? I'm pretty untrustworthy to you, huh."

Seishin shook his head with the same cold expression. "This is more simple than that. No human being can escape the idea that they are the center of the universe."

"Seems like you think I'm a hopelessly egotistical, selfish person."

"I don't. Whatever person we may be talking about, they believe that they

themselves are the one and only core of the world. Everything outside of themselves is merely recognized like an object, they can't escape the idea that they are the only true center. They can't accept that they are nothing but one of the masses that claim to be the center. So they get caught up in the situation and refuse to be relegated to a minor role."

Is that how you see people, Toshio wanted to ask but didn't give voice to. Inside of Seishin was a vacant hole even Toshio couldn't understand. He thought he caught glimpses of it in the occasional acridity that showed itself, an extraordinarily pessimistic attitude towards man and society, but he wasn't sure. He thought that that was the very reason that his friend who at a glance didn't seem to have any problems at all would choose death but he'd never asked the other himself about it. Toshio never brought the topic up.

"....My bad." Toshio sighed lightly and raised a hand. "It might be just like you say. I'm not especially looking to be a hero but it's true I don't want to end up being in a position of just being told by others what to do. I can't deny that I felt like I'd do something about this situation," Toshio said with self derrision. "To be honest, I'd underestimated the situation. I was thinking if I investigated it, I'd be able to see the cause, then I'd know how to treat it. So I thought somehow or another I could pull it off. But, it isn't something that simple. ---Just before I came back from meeting with Koike-san."

"The Koike's Masaharu-san?"

Toshio nodded, telling him that Hirosawa Toyoko had an outbreak, that regardless of how much Toshio pushed on her to come to the hospital, she moved. The same with Maebara Setsu. There was a connection that shouldn't be between the people moving and the illness.

"I've realized it's probably out of my hands, isn't it? I get the feeling it's too dangerous for me to be cocky enough to think I can do it alone.There's what happened with Mutou-san and all."

Seishin nodded.

"I'll man up and admit my crime. I'll tell Ishida it's urgent and consult with him for a written report. I'll take that and go explain the situation to Kanemasa. Urgently. ---Is it fine with that?"

Seishin nodded.

And then at last, as if returning to his senses, a disturbed expression rose to his face.

"That was some way to talk to you," he said as if ashamed. "I know that Toshio is exhausting himself over this as best as he can.... I'm sorry."

Toshio showed a forced smile but at the same time he felt a chill in his spine. Toshio still didn't understand the nature of his childhood friend who could apologize like this while harboring that emptiness within him.

Part 7

Hearing the sound of the slightly slanted door opening, Seishin knew he had been waiting impatiently.

"Good evening," said a smiling childish face which Seishin looked attentively at.

"....What's wrong?"

Nothing, Seishin shook his head. It was a complicated feeling, being self conscious of his emotional dependance now on a girl young enough to be his daughter.

"You're depressed again aren't you? What happened this time?"

"Toshio and I.... well."

"You two had a fight? What trouble you cause," Sunako said with a laugh. Indeed, Seishin smiled bitterly. "Did Doctor Ozaki attack you again?"

"Not quite," Seishin forced a smile looking towards the empty altar. With some hesitation, he summarized the situation.

"I know. Toshio isn't me. Toshio is doing good by Toshio's own thinking, so even if that isn't the best by me, I don't have the right to condemn him.But."

Seishin lost sight of the words to come after that.

"You're angry?"

"Saying no wouldn't be very honest. Yes, I'm angry. Why would he do such a thing, I think. I know myself that I don't have any right to be angry. But I can't overlook it. In the end I attacked him, and am sick with myself for having attacked..." In fact, Seishin said casting his gaze to his own palm. "I think that Toshio is more normal. That's right, I'm just as you said, sentimental. Toshio says that I'm an idealist. I think that's exactly right. I'm more of a singularity. Toshio is more obvious. If you asked who was more in line with the majority, Toshio is more with the majority than I am, and from that vantage point, what I say is too pure and immature. So it's true, I really have no right to criticize Toshio. And yet I ended up attacking him."

"And so you are depressed over that and came here, then."

Seishin tilted his head.

"I wonder if Muroi-san wants to be a martyr?"

"If / do?"

"Yes. One who offers themselves up to God in sacrifice, you want to become such a person. But you cannot see God.As to why, it is because you have been abandoned by God."

Seishin gave a wry smile and shook his head.

"No? But, that is how it looks to me. Muroi-san really is a romantic. as if you want to carry out an absolute justice, an ideal. An absolute justice or ideal would be another name for God, wouldn't it?"

"Aa.... Right. Yes, it would."

Sunako nodded.

"Muroi-san wants to be one who is loyal to God, don't you. There is an illness spreading in the village. If you abide by God's will, the spread of the disease will be in check, it is the right thing to do to save the people of the village. That is why Muroi-san is cooperating to do so. You are the same as Doctor Ozaki in wanting to save the people of the village. But Doctor Ozaki is not as much of a

romantic as Muroi-san."

Seishin stayed quiet watching Sunako's face.

"It isn't only Doctor Ozaki, I think you could say that of all people, though. Anyone would think that if a disease was spreading, they must stop it, wouldn't they? But among them, there are people who would take any means, and also people who, even knowing what the just thing to do is, would be cowardly and take actions to protect themselves. They want to preserve their safety, and so they will handle the disease from a distance at which they can be safe. They cannot do more than that. To other people, they may wish to carry that out as their meaning in life, or something like that perhaps. If so, their own will and pride take precedence. A distance at which those don't conflict. That is how they align their priorities.

But, Muroi-san wants to offer himself up to a single absolute God. You cannot bare not to be loyal towards an absolute justice. There cannot be anything prioritized above God. ---But, what is absolute about a God that none but you hold faith in?"

"Aa..." Seishin buried his face in both hands. "That's it exactly."

"Muroi-san believes in God, doesn't he? I think you want to do ministry by him. You wish to be diligent enough to sacrifice yourself. But no one else believes in the God that Muroi-san believes in. Each time you affirm this, Muroi-san comes to know that there is no God, that it is nothing more than the values you choose to abide by---nothing more than one set of values, of which everybody has their own. That is not Good. Each time Muroi-san loses sight of God." Sunako laughed lightly. "That is why Muroi-san comes here when he is down, isn't it? You resonate with somebody who could this place. You want to believe in God, to sacrifice yourself to it, and yet you cannot find God. Together with that altar."

Seishin looked up at the altar. The altar with an emptiness where the God it should have enshrined would be.

"Even though you know that God should be in place there, you don't know what kind of God to enshrine. God drawn out by your own thought, is an ideal idea but because it is only your own, it doesn't merit the title of God. But on the

other hand, something that other people throughout the world indicate, while it may gather the faith of a great many people, is an impure idea, and after all it doesn't look to be worth the name of God."

"...That's right."

"Even though you are a servant of God, that God will not make an appearance before Muroi-san. That is why Muroi-san feels that he has been abandoned by God."

Seishin nodded. "...That might be the case."

Sunako tilted her head. "Is it difficult to hear this, I wonder? I will be pleased if you can forgive it as a child's simpleminded cruelty, but. ---Therefore, Muroi-san wanted to die?"

"Therefore?"

"Because there is no God in this world. Because he won't show himself before you."

No, Seishin shook his head. "That isn't it, I don't think."

"You don't think?"

"Mm.I don't know. To tell the truth, I don't know my motive."

"That can't be."

"Really," Seishin said with a bitter smile. "I am an extreme idealist, and those ideals are only my ideals is something that I think I grasp. It's probably true that I see shades of that part of myself in this church." But, Seishin said looking up to the altar. "To tell the truth, I don't believe in anything absolute. I think it would be nice if there were something, but I know that there isn't. If there were any one value that were absolute, it would only be the result of sorting them and regulating them into order. And a regulated result, an ideal raised up to absolute status, isn't worth talking about as an ideal. I'm more of an idealist than you're thinking."

Sunako gazed at Seishin as if shocked. "It seems that way, doesn't it."

"Therefore, that isn't it. It wasn't because of something that can be simply reasoned out like this, that can be expressed in words..."

It came from somewhere deeper within. Separate from the part of ruled by knowledge and logic and words, a completely different part suddenly rising, stirring Seishin up. That, which he could only call by the word 'motive.'

"I think it's mysterious myself. ...I wonder what on earth I was thinking then?"

Chapter 10

Part 1

Natsuno was stretched out in the darkness. The only source of light was the panel of his stereo, the only sound his low-volume AM Radio, but that soon became annoying and was shut off. All that remained was a long silence. The faint light of one device and silence.

From there Natsuno tried to conjure the image of death to mind but it wasn't going well.

Today--no, it was already yesterday--Tohru was buried in the mountain. He was no longer anywhere on this earth.

Eternal cessation. At the least, no matter how dark, no matter how dark, no matter how distant any other sensation may be, "death" was completely different from this sensation. This was death, wasn't even something you could have cognizance of. Yourself, the source of cognizance was obliterated, so there was nothing left remaining. Even if everything but yourself remained there, that was something that was far beyond Natsuno's grasp now. To Natsuno it was similar to the entire world vanishing but without Natsuno himself there cognizant of the world being lost. That kind of nihility. Nihility and nothing to hold awareness of, perfect nothingness.

Tohru had ended up going there and Natsuno too would eventually. His parents too, Tamotsu too, Aoi too, all humans pushed their way there. Towards the ruin of losing everything in the world.

He didn't think it was scary. It was nothing more than ardent curiosity. A nothing that couldn't even be imagined but that clearly existed was incomprehensible. Even though it definitively existed, it wasn't something anyone could touch. The moment one made contact with it, it became impossible to hold knowledge of it.

Yourself no longer there. A self to feel "there" didn't even exist. Even though

he was the one who should have wanted that. Natsuno was the one left behind.

The continuing deaths. Megumi. Tohru. There were others too. He thought that he'd seen funerals here and there throughout the village. And moves. Where they fleeing from someone from somewhere? Even Tohru found it suspicious. Said this year was strange. Enough people that it could be called strange were leaving the village, yet Natsuno was still the village's prisoner.

As he breathed a soft sigh, Natsuho realized the small sound. It was like the sound of a rolled up cloth unrolling down. He casually looked towards the direction the sound was coming from, the swaying curtain near his bedside. It wasn't as if the wind were swaying it, it was more like someone had been rolling the curtain up and let go of it, as if it were still fluttering from that.

Natsuno found himself watching over that movement. The curtain immediately stopped, hanging expressionless, unblown by the wind.

That was probably his imagination, he thought. Thinking he'd heard a sound, thinking he saw it sway. He realized he heard a faint noise outside the window. It may have been the sound of Natsuno waking up and creaking in his bed. The night had unexpected sounds.

Natsuno stared fixedly at the curtain. The window was opened, but. --He thought it was open. When returning to his room he didn't remember closing it.

The curtain didn't move. There was no longer any sound. As if it were all saying it was his imagination, on the contrary, Natsuno held a firm conviction that somebody had definitely moved the curtain. Somebody opened the curtain, and made a noise outside of the window.

Natsuno rose up and pulled the curtain to the side. Just as he stretched his hand out enough to faintly see outside, the exact same sound as before was heard.

I knew it, this was it. Natsuno opened the curtain just a bit from the side. The glass of the window was like a dark mirror of the room, a shadowed reflection of himself depicted there. When he opened the curtain further, ten centimeters past the window's sliding door, he peered into the lusterless darkness. There were no nearby sounds.

Natsuno drew nearer to the frame around the glass. The light within his room cast his own shadow over things but as expected he couldn't see anything. In the hazy shadows of darkness, the empty courtyard stretched out long to the side, beyond it forest, a visible thicket. Very nearby was the dense thicket of raspberries. They were swaying. Neither the nearby underbrush nor the tree tops were moving. Only the feeble branches of the raspberry plant were moving as if shivering, and that too stopped immediately. Just like the curtain before.

As he watched over that movement, somebody was watching over him as he watched the darkness, so he felt. He could feel their gaze. The presence of somebody watching him, from somewhere not far off, was there.

Even focusing his eyes, he couldn't see beyond the shadows of the night. If someone were even one meter deep within the forest lurking, Natsuno probably wouldn't be able to see it. There wasn't enough light outside of the window.

Without averting their gaze, pouring into him. Definitely, somebody was looking at Natsuno.

But, who?

What immediately came to mind was the face of a girl the same age as himself but that didn't seem very realistic. Natsuno had acknowledged that Megumi was gone. Megumi's desk was still at school but lately there were no flower ornaments at it. Megumi's desk that remained as others avoided it was moved inconspicuously each time seats were changed, and by now was forced out towards a back row out of the line of sight. That was one link in the greater part of erasing Megumi's existence from this world. Having a tangible realism to it, Megumi's death was engraved into the world, and that notched out truth was already well worn in.

That by now Megumi did not exist was as clear to Natsuno as the fact that he did. Therefore, the someone who was watching him could not have been Megumi.

"...Tohru-chan?" With a voice not loud enough to call it giving voice, that was what poured out. They said the dead went to say their farewells to the living. It was a terribly common ghost story. Was it possible this was a case of that?

While thinking that that was impossible, that did have a grain of reality to it.

If so, how great would that be? If there was something to visit to say farewells, Tohru's will, something that abided by his intentions remained even now while his cast off shell was buried.

His eyes pondered the darkness but after all he couldn't see a thing. Nothing made any other noise. The thicket of raspberries didn't move. While standing there, the feel of that gaze faded.

Something that might have been Tohru had departed. ---That was the feeling Natsuno had.

Part 2

On October 5th another death notice was delivered to Toshio. Sotoba's Mursako Hiromi died. The boy of merely nine reached his end quickly.

At noon he was called by Ishida. Tomorrow he would be finished with the written report, he said.

"Sorry about this, so suddenly."

No, Ishida said with a strangely relieved tone to his answer.

"Either me or Seishin will take it to Kanemasa," Toshio started to say when Shiomi Yuki peeked her face into the waiting room. "I'll be right there. Just have them wait a sec."

"Are you in the middle of examinations?"

At Ishida's voice, Toshio gave a bitter smile. "Seems like somehow my morning appointments have stretched out until two or three."

"Well, that's, I'm sorry for taking your time. So you are having examinations even on Saturdays, now?"

"Fortunately, my staff's understanding. For some reason today our X-ray technician is out, and we've been a whirlwind of activity," Toshio laughed.

"Anyway, set it up so that we can meet at the very nearest opportunity. Yeah--

tomorrow, could you call again when the written report is finished? Things are already so busy here, we'll try contacting Kanemasa once we hear from you."

"I understand. Then, when I am finished I shall call. To you, Doctor?"

"I might be out on an emergency call. It'd probably be better to have you contact Seishin."

Ishida gave his understanding and hung up the phone. Toshio hurried to the TVX room. Enroute he met with Kiyomi who was seeing a patient off from the physiotherapy room.

"Nagata-san, have you heard from Shimoyama-san?"

"Take care," Kiyomi said to the patient then turned to face Toshio, her voice low. "He still has not called."

"That's weird, huh? He's never missed work without permission before."

The X-ray technician Shimoyama didn't come in. Even now he hadn't called.

"Shall we try calling him?" Kiyomi's expression was clouded. It was because of what happened with Mutou.

"Try that for me. It's possible he's exhausted and still asleep, but."

Kiyomi nodded, watching Toshio hurry off down the hall. From there she turned towards the office. From there she telephoned Shimoyama's house.

Shimoyama lived in the housing district outside of Mizobe. To get to the hospital by car it took about thirty minutes.

After calling three times, Shimoyama's wife answered. After being told who was calling and why, she said Oh my. "I am sorry. He said he would call himself but, he did not?"

"Yes."

"Please wait just a moment, yes?"

You don't need to force him on, she started to say but didn't make it in time. After some time, Shimoyama spoke on the phone.

"What's wrong? Are you all right?"

"Ah... Nagata-san, is it."

Shimoyama's voice was low.

"Everyone is worried you know! What's wrong, are you ill, or?"

Before Kiyomi could say it all, Shimoyama spoke up. "I quit."

Eh, and Kiyomi's words came to a stop. "Just now, what did you say?"

"I am quitting my job. Please convey that to the doctor."

Kiyomi's mouth hung agape. "Shimoyama-san... That's...."

Towada who had been at the clerical desk looked up dubiously.

"Please spare me. I have a wife and child. The loan on the house isn't even paid off."

Kiyomi's mouth hung open but eventually closed. "I see.... But, I think it would still be better to tell the doctor directly. Are you against that?"

Shimoyama said Please spare me once again and hung up the phone.

Kiyomi breathed a deep sigh. Towada asked what had happened.

"He says that he quits.... Shimoyama-san does."

But that's, Towada said, but his eyes quickly lowered to the documents on the desk. "....Is that so."

Kiyomi found herself nodding, peering into the examination room. Toshio still wasn't back from the TVX-Ray room. In the treatment room next door were Yasuyo and Yuki but they were sterilizing tools for the next patient.

"The Doctor isn't back yet?"

"Not yet," Yuki laughed. "Without Shimoyama-san here, the pace has gone nuts, hasn't it?"

"He says that he quit."

Yasuyo and Yuki's faces snapped up. But that's Yuki's voice rose up, though Yasuyo cut in. She motioned beyond the wall waving them with her hand as if towards a secret meeting place.

"Quit, you say..."

"Please spare me, I was told. Tell the doctor for me, he said."

"Whyyy?" Yuki's voice rose childishly. Quickly she covered her mouth and lowered her tone of voice. "I mean, just before Shimoyama-san was wondering if he should move here to Sotoba, he was even saying."

"It's in response to what happened at Mutou's place, isn't it." The one to say it was Yasuyo.

"But."

"Shimoyama-san has a wife and child after all. His child is young, and they just built a house last year. They have a loan on it and all."

Kiyomi nodded. "That's what he said."

"Really, even if we say we're prepared, when there was a death at Mutou-san's place, it wears on you, doesn't it?" Yasuyo said lowering her voice even more. "Mutou-san himself was anguished over it. Saying what if he didn't bring it home."

"That's true..."

"When he went to Mutou-san's place's funeral, laying eyes on it must have got him thinking, don't you think? With all of this, I can't say I blame Shimoyama-san. That man isn't from Sotoba, after all."

"That's not the point!" Yuki cut in angrily. "I understand how he feels but, like this... it's...."

Yasuyo shrugged her shoulders. "Well I do think there was a better way to do it. At least talk with the Doctor, give a word to everyone, or to apologize."

"Right, that!"

"But, he's probably already afraid of setting foot in Sotoba. That's what I think it is. Sooner or later, the people from Mizobe will notice, and at school or work, it's going to come to people saying not to interact with those bunch from Sotoba."

Kiyomi sighed. "It does look like it's going to become the case."

While they were muttering, Toshio returned to the examination room. When they told him about Shimoyama, Toshio, and Ritsuko who had come back with him held their breaths. All the same, Ritsuko didn't say a word, and Toshio only left it at "Is that right."

"Tell Towada-kun and have him handle the paperwork. Mutou-san is still on leave for mourning, so he doesn't need to rush to it right now. Sorry to do this to Shimoyama-san but he'll just have to be patient."

Kiyomi nodded. Suddenly, she felt incredibly hopeless, and at the same time terrified.

What was going to happen to all of them ---from now on.

Part 3

The familiar paper lantern hung outside the front of the Murasako rice shop. The moment she saw it, Mutou Aoi felt like she was going to cry. The smell of incense, the bustle of people, a flourish of activity inappropriate for the night. They were all things she'd just experience. Even though it had just finally ended. Aoi had the feeling she was in a repeating bad dream.

Tamotsu urged on Aoi who had stood unable to move.

".....Let's go."

Mm, Aoi nodded. They neared the shop and peered in. In the shop were shelves near the wall, and those were draped over with the black and white curtains. They could see past the open door into the dwelling area. As they went up they immediately saw Murasako Munetaka seated.

Aoi gripped her prayer beads, approaching Munetaka. When she spoke to him, he looked up with eyes red from crying to Aoi.

"....Ah, from Mutou-san's place."

Aoi bowed her head. "My condolences for your loss."

"It's very polite of you. ---Did the Mutou-san's household also lose their oldest son?"

Yes, Aoi nodded.

"That's terrible. Have things calmed down?"

Aoi gave a troubled smile. "Muntaka's family has had it terrible, too. That is... isn't it hard?"

Mm, Munetaka nodded. "He was still little. It's not that I wouldn't care if he were bidder, but it's just so pitiful."

"I understand."

"But, maybe now he doesn't have anything to lose, it might be better that it was now. If he'd had a job, if he had a girlfriend, that might be even more pitiful."

That can't, Aoi started to say interrupted by a sob. To those left behind it didn't matter if they were an adult or a child. It still meant that a family member had died.

Tamotsu prodded her lightly. "Nee-san." Aoi blinked, quickly wiping her tears.

"I'm sorry. Even though I came to pay condolences to you."

"It's all right. I need to pay condolences to you. It really was a shame."

Yes, Aoi nodded.

"Uhm... Where is Masao-kun?"

Munetaka made a complicated expression, with a warped smile. "Upstairs. He said it was too much effort and he won't come down, holing up in his room."

"But that's... even though it's the night vigil?"

Munetaka smiled bitterly. "I didn't like Hiromi much. He doesn't enjoy everyone in the house's attention being turned towards Hiromi."

"That's..."

"Even now that he's died he doesn't make any expression over it," Munetaka

said making an expression as if smelling something unpleasant somewhere. "Oh, is all he had to say. He looked like it was completely someone else's problem. Even if we tell him to come down, he says it has nothing to do with him." He's that kind of guy, Munetaka said as if spitting the words out.

"... I was upset over my older brother's death, and during the all night vigil, I ended up saying something cruel to Masao-kun. I thought that I must apologize for that."

"Masao did something rude before you did, didn't he? I'll have to apologize for him, too."

"Not at all."

"Masao won't come down. His room's on the second floor. Sorry, but could I have you go up by yourselves?"

Aoi nodded and urged Tamotsu on.

Weaving between condolence callers, they went up to the second floor. Tamotsu knew which room was Masao's. Tamotsu tried to open the door but it wouldn't open, as if locked. He tried knocking on the door.

"Oi, Masao," Tamotsu called out but there was no response from within. "You're in there, aren't you? Oi."

"Masao-kun, it's Aoi. Please, open the door."

For a while there was no sign of life from inside. After how many times knocking or calling out, there was the sound of movement and the door faintly opened. The inside of the room was dark. As if trying to peep through the crevice, Masao's face faintly peered out.

"Uhm.... That is, I am sorry for your loss." Aoi said, Masao turning away.

"It's not nothin' to do with me."

That's terrible, Aoi started to say but her words stopped. Tonight she had come to apologize. She should not say anything to blame him.

"That is, I'm sorry about before. I think that what I said was mean."

Whatever, Masao said through a cracked voice.

"Sorry. We were a little upset, so."

".....Oh." Masao said lowly, closing the door. There was the clinking sound of a lock.

"---Masao." Tamotsu knocked on the door. Aoi called out to him too but there was once again no response from within.

They spent some time outside of the door calling to him but as Tamotsu breathed a sigh, Aoi stopped knocking. She wanted to cry something terrible.

Tamotsu gently nudged her, turning back saying it couldn't be helped. They thought they'd come to apologize another time.

Masao leaned heavily against the door frame for some time, listening to the sounds in the hallway.

Light footsteps carried far off down the hallway; when hearing them go downstairs he pulled away from the door, staggering to the bed. Without any power in his legs, he collapsed into a seated position as if his back gave out. His remaining strength gave out and he fell, the back of his head bumping the wall but Masao gave no particular response. His eyes were blank, open as he looked at the ceiling. Those eyes looked possessed. The conjunctiva had a strangely blueish hue to them. His face was white, with no color to his lips either. Those lips were licked by a tongue equally as devoid of color. His throat was inexplicably dry. He wanted water but movement was tiresome.

".....Water."

His mumbled voice did not reach past the door.

Masao just continued gazing at the ceiling, once again murmuring for water.

Part 4

Again there was the presence of somebody outside the window.

Natsuno left his desk and tried opening the curtain a bit. For some reason or

other the window was closed. So all that he could see out the window was his own reflection in the glass.

A pattering noise came from within the room; he turned to see in the light of the lamp that the English dictionary he had left open on the desk had just closed. ---Yes, there would be no sound unless something moved.

Natsuno wasn't sure whether it was something that could rightly be called a presence. Those may have been more things like the sounds of breathing, the sounds of clothes rustling, or the sound of one moving about, those such sounds, and it might not have been his hearing that sensed it so much as his sense of smell. He wasn't particularly into the occult nor did he think this was anything supernatural. It was the feeling that it was probably something so slight as to not even pull at one's conscious thoughts, that nothing could indicate anything to specifically say "this" was it.

(...Someone's stare.)

Yes, even if 'presence' was understood as something like that, he didn't know how you could tell someone as staring at you. He certainly had had the feeling that he was being watched by someone, and turned around to in fact meet someone's gaze. He had the feeling from experience that a gaze was something that could be sensed but he didn't know why one could feel it. But certainly, he thought he could. And now that was what he was feeling.

Someone was watching. Possibly outside the window, lurking in the darkness, in the underbrush.

(.....But, who is it?)

It isn't Tohru, he felt. If Tohru had come to say his farewells, then in that case, the someone watching Natsuno now wouldn't be Tohru. He had the feeling that coming by just once to say farewell was a very Tohru-like action. But coming twice to visit wasn't like Tohru. To always be so lingeringly regretful and full of lingering affection was completely out of character for Tohru.

(Then, who is it?)

What ended up floating to mind was Megumi after all. If it was once it wouldn't be Megumi. But if it was two or more times in a row, he had the

feeling it was Megumi. If it wasn't Megumi herself it was someone like Megumi.

He put his face to the window but as expected he couldn't see any human shapes in the darkness. He moved away from the window, closed the curtain and breathed a sigh. He felt that something that was like a gaze being blocked off. That was a relief but it was terribly reminiscent of when he'd felt Megumi.

(But, Shimizu's dead...)

There was no Tohru, nor Megumi. There was no way they could come to see him. Returning to his desk, by chance he ended up looking at the disorganized box he had thrown a random assortment of things into. The dictionary's box. He had stuck it between his books to serve as a filing case.

Natsuno took out a single post card from within that. While thinking to throw it away, some how or another it ended up placed inhere.

Yuuki Natsuno-sama

The addressee's name was written with mindless pretension. An out-of-season late summer greeting card. Something that shouldn't have been delivered delivered right to Natsuno's hand.

Natsuno stared at that and moved to throw it into the trash when stopped by something. He returned it into its prior box carelessly. It wasn't like he had any intent to hold onto it. It was just that on the otherhand he didn't have any particular intent to throw it away either.

Natsuno perked up his ears, took a breath and opened up the closed dictionary once again. He still hadn't gotten through today's itinerary yet. To Natsuno this wasn't an act called "studying" it was a "price" he had to pay in order to get out of the village. If he didn't do it, then his wish would become all the more far off.

Closing off his awareness of anything outside the window, Natsuno began with his dictionary.

Part 5

On the afternoon of October 6th, when Yuuki went to creole a sign saying

they were not open for business was hung. While he turned to head back, somehow he didn't feel like returning home, so with no other choice he wandered the neighborhood absently. After making a lap he ended up in front of creole again to see that the sign saying they weren't open was taken down. While thinking Oh? he pushed on the door, which opened.

"Welcome," Hasegawa smiled from the counter.

"Just a bit ago you were closed for business. I thought for sure that you were closed today."

Aa, said Hasegawa with a wry smile. "Sorry about that, yes? We were just out for a bit. There was a funeral."

"---Funeral?"

"Yes. In the shopping district there is the rice shop, yes? Their child has died. I am not personally familiar with them but as I do know them from around the shopping district, I went to pay my regrets."

Again, Yuuki thought. Looking slightly down, he became caught up in his thoughts.

"Is there something the matter?"

"No---this is definitely strange. Again, is the only thing I can say. Mutou-san's place's son had just died. There's something to it if this many people are dying. Don't you think so?"

"That is..." Hasegawa was visibly dismayed. "That certainly seems it maybe the case, but."

"This is just how it is in the country, I had heard. That might be the case. However, that would only be if there were half as many deaths as this. No matter what common sense you try to shine over this, I think it's strange." Yuuki said, looking at Hasegawa's face. "Do you think it might be an epidemic?"

Hasegawa sunk into silence as if unable to find his words. Hanging his head with that face, it was clear to Yuuki that Hasegawa had suspected as much himself.

"But, the town hall has not said anything...."

"Haven't you thought that they're keeping it quiet? That they fear the village going into a panic."

".....That may be the case."

There were only Yuuki and Hasegawa in the shop, where unfitting, bright piano music echoed. As they remained in that silence, the door of the shop opened. Perhaps Tashiro entering into the shop could sense the strange mood in the air; he looked between Yuuki and Hasegawa.

"Something----wrong?"

Yuuki repeated his assertions. He could tell by his expression that Tashiro had suspected it himself too after all. Everyone thought that it was strange. Nobody said anything about it.

"Would it not be better to make sure, I wonder?" Yuuki said, Tashiro thinking for a bit. Yuuki continued. "Of course, they might be keeping it quiet because they don't know how to handle it. If so then that's fine, I'll cooperate too. But, I can't just stay quiet like this. Even though we know it's strange, I for one cannot just remain uneasy without confirming anything."

"There is that, huh," Tashiro nodded with a pensive expression. "That would be better, huh?"

It was Tashiro who called the Ozaki Clinic. He called Toshio and broached it by saying there was something he wanted to talk with him about a bit. With that, Toshio could guess what the topic of the conversation was. He only replied "Got it," in a low voice without asking about what. He said he would come to creole. He had to be back before the afternoon examinations began but when he asked if that was all right, Tashiro agreed. Once again Hasegawa hanged the closed for business sign.

Toshio really did come without delay. Yuuki had seen him at the hospital, or even here, a few times so it wasn't their first meeting. As soon as Toshio came in, he very casually ordered a coffee from Hasegawa, sat down at the counter and lit a cigarette.

The one to spark the talk off was Tashiro. Out of everyone there he'd known Toshio the longest.

"So, uhm... The Murasako's Hiromi-kun died, huh."

Yeah, Toshio nodded without a hint of shyness, but somewhere, some unease rose up in him.

"Mutou-san's place's oldest son died too. Somehow, you know? It's like there's the feeling there are too many deaths continuing."

"And?"

"We were talking about it here, but---it's not an epidemic or anything, is it?" Toshio exhaled smoke while looking directly at Tashiro. Tashiro hastily added on. "No, I mean, if there are circumstances making you keep it quiet, we'll cooperate. It's just between us, so if that's how it is could you just tell us? It feels very strange, it's kind of like, without an answer---"

Toshio crushed out his cigarette and sighed lightly. "It's not an epidemic. At least, none of those who've died to this point died of a disease classified as an epidemic."

"---Really?"

"I'll bet my medical license on it. Tests've all turned up nill. At least of those I've overseen, not a single patient was suffering from an infectious disease."

The one to push the topic further was Yuuki. "Then, that this many have died is all a coincidence?"

"I'll acknowledge that it's been too many to be a coincidence."

"But it isn't an epidemic? There's no way that it is communicable?"

"Epidemics and infectious illnesses aren't something you can talk about as two separate things. But, there isn't any proof that it's communicable either."

"There's---no proof?"

Toshio propped his chin in his hands. He looked quietly into the coffee Hasegawa had put out for him and lit a new cigarette. "I can't say anything. I'm sure that it's not an epidemic, and there's no proof that it's spreading either. I don't want to say something careless and set the village into an uproar, so that's as much as I can say."

"But, Toshio." Tashiro interrupted, Toshio falling into silence. He seemed to be hesitating over something, thinking, before he opened his mouth.

"I can't say anything but---How about this? If my family died, I'd cremate them."

Yuuki gazed at Toshio's profile for a moment, then met Hasegawa and Tashiro's gaze with a nod. --As they thought.

"...Understood," Yuuki gave an exhale. It became a heavy sigh. "Then, in other words, it's not an epidemic, is it."

"It's not an epidemic. You can trust me on that."

"This is just something I'm asking as idle chit-chat but, there have been a lot of deaths. And sudden deaths at that. That's why---well, I'm feeling concerned about my health. Is there anything I should be careful about?"

Toshio didn't look at Yuuki. "Let me see. I'd be careful of anemia, if it were me. Poor complexion, looking sluggish, no appetite, shortness of breath---if you're feeling like that, it'd be best to see a doctor."

"What are the subjective symptoms?"

"There aren't," Toshio said as if throwing the words down. "If the person themselves complained to the people around them that they were feeling sick, they wouldn't be dying without warning, would they? The person themselves doesn't have any awareness of it. Lately, there've been a lot of patients like that too. The person themselves doesn't have the slightest awareness of being sick, it's the people around them who get worried and bring them in. Those kind of patients are a hassle. Even if you talk to them they're absent minded. I'm not sure whether they're listening to what I say or not, if you ask them a question, they're slow to answer. It's hard to make communication with them. It's like you're talking to a doll or something. They make a face like it's somebody else's problem."

".....Is there any preventative method?"

"Who knows? It's pretty banal but be sure to rest and eat, I guess. It'd be

better not to drink the groundwater. Probably better to handle dead bodies and waste with gloves, too. Also be sure to exterminate pests. Especially ticks."

Is that so, murmured Yuuki. They probably didn't know the infection route. And it also meant there was a chance that ticks or something were the carriers.

"And... if they're seen by a doctor quickly, they'll be cured?"

Toshio glanced fleetingly at Yuuki then breathed his smoke in the opposite direction. "-----Nope. If it's plain anemia, it'll cure but if not, it's tough, to be honest."

Yuuki held his breath. At last Toshio turned to face him. "I trust the customers at this shop. Not to be particularly stupid, I mean. I assume you won't take rash actions, won't to go into a frenzy of discrimination."

Yuuki nodded. "And, we will not spread irresponsible gossip. Please trust us in this."

Mm, Toshio nodded.

Part 6

While fighting with a strange sense of intimidation, Natsuno quietly filled his notebook. He'd long since given up studying vocab or tangling with math drills. With that something outside the window putting a strange pressure of sorts on him, he couldn't focus on his work. Like this with his attention focused outside the window, he had just been absently transcribing the names of historical words and names.

It his hand were able to remember what it was writing that'd be fine. He thought that while moving his hand, suddenly noticing that in the sidelines of his notebook the words "Tohru" and "Shimizu" appeared. He erased them each time but the name that appeared more frequently was overwhelmingly "Shimizu." And as time stretched on, the difference grew more pronounced.

He remembered feeling like this---like he currently did, like he was under a bizarre surveillance. He also thought he knew the source of it. But, Megumi should have been dead. That she was sealed away in a coffin wasn't something Natsuno confirmed with his own eyes but she should have been made up like

Tohru and buried in the ground.

But, someone was outside the window. From the darkness they were looking at the window---at Natsuno. Through the curtain, at Natsuno's shadow, fixedly staring at that.

After erasing "Shimizu" who knew how many times, he gave up on that and took out the post card from his holder case. Natsuno had an emotion he couldn't understand. The letters and the picture, all of it looked like it was trying not to be self-serving while contrastingly overflowing with self-appeal. It looked to maintain an appropriately formal distance but it was blatantly getting closer. There was nothing written aside from words about the lingering summer heat. Nonetheless, there was an all too clear intent of the sender there even if unwrit, so clear that it betrayed her true feelings. ---That defined Megumi, he realized.

It was the same now. Obvious surveillance. But the observer hid themselves, it was clear they were trying to hide themselves. That much was just too obvious, so instead it only made him more certain he was being watched.

(.....Shimizu.)

But, there was no way.

Natsuno stood up. He opened the curtain and the window. The light from within the room flowed outside but the darkness between the tree trunks and thickets only grew darker. And an obvious gaze. Someone was in that darkness--and he was confident he was being watched from somewhere not far off.

Natsuno surveyed the darkness. He couldn't see anyone. It's not that no one was there but just that he couldn't see them. The other could see Natsuno. Without a doubt they were watching.

He didn't turn towards the darkness and demand who they were, nor did he have a mind to. Staying silent, Natsuno held out the post card in one hand. To be sure it was visible in the light, he slowly turned it over with his fingertips several times. He had the feeling he could hear someone nearby gasping for breath. And, the faint sound of someone moving about.

The gaze was strong. He had such a feeling. Thinking such he moved the post

card from the right hand holding it to the left. Slowly, doing it so that his observer could see, he tore at the corner of it. Again, a faint noise.

With both hands he tore the postcard a second time and a third. Once it was in tiny scraps, he threw them outside of the window. The white scraps of paper danced, literal confetti, raining down in the darkness.

Surveying the darkness--their hiding place, Natsuno closed the window. Closing the curtain he returned to his desk and listened intently. There was a faint noise. This time it was too obvious. The sound of underbrush swaying, someone's footsteps. They were coming directly closer to the window.

---Here.

Someone was there outside the window, and that somebody let out a soft voice. The voice that didn't convey any meaning sounded both like a very faint wail, and like a muffled outburst of a sob.

The soft sounds continued. Almost like a small animal was scurrying about on the earth. Right now if he stood up, if he opened the curtain, he had the feeling he would see them. They wouldn't be able to hide themselves fast enough, he felt. Natsuno bore out the temptation to do it. He didn't know why. He had a feeling he must not see it. He must not peek outside.

That may have been because he thought there was something forbidden that existed outside of that window, or possibly that he was just plain afraid of what he would see. He had the feeling if he saw it he couldn't go back, and at the same time if he saw it he would be disappointed. And in his depths, what Natsuno truly feared was that he wouldn't see anything at all.

And if he were to throw open the curtain so quickly they would have no chance to hide? He didn't think that it would have any immediate impact. What was scary was being suspended between recognizing that there was something there he couldn't see and the recognizing it as something merely hiding.

He listened closely and bore it. The presence outside of the window crept about in the area and at last passed. Natsuno returned to the tasks in his notebook but as expected his hand kept bringing about the word "Shimizu" when he wasn't attentive.

The next morning, not having gotten much sleep, Natsuno went out into the back yard. In the faint blue light, the earth with sparse weeds was black. There were two or three white droppings. When he picked them up, they were pieces of the postcard.

He could only find three fragments. Any fragments beyond that were nowhere to be seen.

Part 7

First thing on the morning of the seventh, there was a call from the Murasako household. That morning when they tried to awaken their third son, Masao, he was dead, they said. That put Toshio in a somber mood. The Murasako household's Hiromi had just died. During the over-night vigil, the funeral, while the household was rushing about, the young man suffered quietly in illness and died with nobody tending to him.

When the reception desk opened, the contractor's Yasumori Setsuko entered. He could tell by looking at her face. It was that. Calamity was steadily falling upon the contractors. That afternoon a young man living in Sotoba called Shimizu Yuu was brought in. This was another outbreak, as expected. His condition was even worse than Setsuko's but not bad enough to call for an ambulance. There was no longer any reason to fear rousing suspicion at the hospital that received him, so he advised him to go if he wanted to, but that was it. Going to the National Hospital wouldn't change the result. If he went to Mizobe to be hospitalized for analysis, it just meant that he would die there without ever returning home again. Of course that couldn't be said to the patient himself so that was all the more reason to hesitate in recommending it.

When he returned to the waiting room, while he was just drawing into the graph, there was a call from Seishin. Seishin's voice was stiff.

"Ishida is gone."

Toshio's eyes remained on the graph as he responded. "That's..."

"He disappeared, last night. Talking with his family, that's all that she can say."

Toshio was on the verge of dropping his pen. "Ridiculous."

"According to his wife, at night, when she had gone to bed, he was definitely awake in the living room, she says. From there, when she woke up in the morning, he was nowhere in the home. The car was left in the garage. Thinking he could not have gone far, they've been searching for him since this morning but they haven't yet found him."

(Disappearance--moving.)

Toshio stood up. "I'll try going to Ishida-san's place."

"I will go too."

They made plans to meet up at Ishida's house, hurrying with the things they were to bring. Ishida's wife Chie's color was drained.

"What could have happened. ---For him to go missing, that's just...."

"Calm down. Last night, was anything strange about Ishida-san's behavior? Or for example was he pale, was he not very talkative?"

"No.... Not really. It was the same as usual."

"Did he eat dinner?"

"He ate as much as usual. The day before yesterday was busy it seemed, he had brought his work home. Yesterday he took off from work in the morning to finish it, too. But, it seems he finished with that and in the afternoon he went to the office, and had a relaxing evening drink. If anything, he was more cheerful than usual!"

Then, Toshio and Seishin understood exchanging looks. It wasn't as if Ishida had an outbreak. But, if not then why did Ishida suddenly go missing. And was there any reason for him to leave the house after his wife had gone to sleep?

"Uhm," Seishin started to speak with Chie. "Pardon me but, we were to receive a few documents from Ishida-san; might you know of them?"

"Documents... you say?"

"Yes. You said that he had brought work home the day before yesterday, I believe that would have been them."

Ah, Chie nodded. "Then that would be in my husband's room. I saw him put the envelope in his desk drawer. ---Yes, those must have been for you, Junior Monk. I thought it was strange that he didn't bring it to the town hall when he went back to work yesterday."

Chie stood before them and guided them to the room on the second story. The room upon immediately going upstairs was probably formerly used by Ishida's child. There was a word processor set on the writing desk, and furniture in place that no longer seemed used, and two or three cardboard boxes piled up with unnecessary items.

"This is my son's room---now it is used as a storage room," Chie said with a seemingly embarrassed smile, opening the drawer on the writing desk. "It's right---what's this?"

Chie searched within the drawer. "Now that's strange. I thought I had saw him put it in here, but..." Chie murmured while opening another drawer. "How odd. I wonder if he had brought it to the office after all?"

"Pardon me," Toshio said nudging Chie aside. "Would you mind if I looked? It's an important document."

"Yes... Help yourself."

Toshio searched the drawer. It was mostly filled with stationary and memo note pads with things written down, but there wasn't anything anywhere that looked like a properly written up document. It wasn't just the written report that he couldn't find but the memos and copies and data he would have used were nowhere to be found.

"The data shouldn't have been..."

Hearing Toshio's voice, Seishin pulled the word processor towards himself. Ishida should have been using this. He looked but there didn't appear to be a disk in it. He tested the eject button but as expected there was no disk inside of it. Opening the lid, he pressed the switch and started it up.

"Toshio, is there a disk anywhere?"

"There is. Just three. Two of them have labels. One's New Years Cards, one's an address book.

Seishin accepted the disk from Toshio. They tried the third one with no label but they didn't find the document they were looking for. Nor was it saved on the Word Processor itself. Just to be sure they checked the other two disks but, just as labeled, there were only New Years cards and an address book on them; the report was nowhere to be found.

"It's not here... not anywhere."

Toshio turned to face Chie. "He didn't take the documents to another location? He didn't save it to a disk or anything?"

"No. My husband was a very orderly person, he wouldn't scatter things about. If it isn't there, I don't think it is in the house."

"This is ridiculous."

Chie shook her head, seeming bewildered. "If it isn't in the desk, it is not here. ... Yes, I am certain that yesterday he was empty handed. Even though he was going to the office, there was nothing in his hand. He usually does go empty-handed."

"Are you certain? He did not take anything from the entryway before going out?"

"Nothing. He asked for me to make onigiri for lunch. I was told that in the morning and so when I came here to bring him tea and onigiri, my husband was just then putting the document into the envelope. He put it into the envelope, took out the disk and tidied up, and all of it was placed into that drawer. Since he was finished, he came down to eat." Chie said, looking between Toshio and Seishin. "Was it.... that important of a document?"

"Well," Toshio prevaricated.

"I went down with my husband. Since you'd come through all the trouble of bringing it up, he had said to me, he would bring it back down, he said. So we went back down to the first floor, ate lunch, and from there he said he was going to the office. He changed in the bedroom---the bedroom is on the first floor. He changed clothes there and then went out. I tended to him until he went out, so there's no mistake. He was definitely empty handed. He didn't come back to the second story."

"It's all right," Seishin interposed. "We were simply surprised. It is all right. There is a spare."

Is that so, said Chie sounding half relieved, but have unsatisfied and still confused. "Uhm, I will try to look for it."

"Please do. If there is any word from Ishida-san, if you could tell him to contact the temple or the hospital urgently."

Yes, nodded Chie once again becoming uneasy about her husband's whereabouts. "But... Where could he have gone. This is ridiculous."

Comforting Chie, Toshio and Seishin left the Ishida household. Toshio asked if Seishin wanted to swing by the hospital but Seishin looked to his wrist watch and shook hishead.

"No... I have to get back. There's a vigil tonight."

Those words seemed to get Toshio in the heart. "I see...."

"Ishida-san----"

"No matter how you look at it, it's strange. He shouldn't have suddenly gone missing. At least going by his wife's story, it doesn't seem like he suffered an outbreak. But still, he hid where he was going, going out in the middle of the night. And on top of that, probably bringing the document and all its materials with him."

As for the data, Toshio had it on hand himself. Seishin's notes were also on hand, so the document itself could be made again. But why did Ishida have to completely disappear with them?

The village is surrounded by death.

This was like, yes--like being surrounded. Moves, retirements, the feeling that something was intentionally isolating them. Toshio and Seishin were being seiied, plucked off---interfered with.

(Ridiculous...)

That in itself was a ridiculous prospect. Who would be doing something like that and for what purpose? Was he planning to cook up his own ridiculous conspiracy theories now?

"Something is strange..." Seishin murmured behind Toshio whose hand lingered on the car door as he thought. Toshio nodded.

"....It's possible this isn't just a disease."

Seishin nodded too, and with that turned towards his own car.

(The vigil... At the Murasako house.)

They had two with an outbreak, and the disappearances---

While returning to the hospital, that repeated in Toshio's head. One death, two outbreaks, one disappearance. Chanting it like a magic spell, he returned to the hospital, there was a young boy about high school age standing before the entryway's closed curtain peering in. He must have noticed the car as he turned around, coming jogging towards Toshio as he pulled into the parking lot.

"What is it? An emergency case?" Toshio asked while getting out of the car. He'd seen that face somewhere before. He'd given a few medical exams to him.

"It isn't an emergency case, but... You are Doctor Ozaki, sir?" The young man said. Hearing that, Toshio remembered. A long while back, he was the patient who had been brought in for a knot on his shinbone.

"You were, if I remember, Yuuki-san's place's son, weren't you?"

"That's right," the boy nodded. He had said his first name was Natsuno, if he remembered. "I have something I would like to ask you, Doctor; may I?"

"By all means. By the way, you were called Yuuki-kun, I guess? Or was it Koide-kun?"

Natsuno shrugged his shoulders. "Either one is fine. My name in the family register is Koide but normally it is Yuuki."

"Then, Yuuki-kun it is. ---Yuuki-kun, what did you want to ask?"

"It is about Shimizu-san. Shimizu, Megumi-san. You were the doctor who did her medical examination, weren't you?"

"I examined her, and I was the one who did her death certificate, too."

"What did she die of?"

"Acute anemia, wasn't it?"

Natsuno hesitated to speak, looking to Toshio with upturned eyes.

"She was definitely dead? ---See, there's a lot of things like brain death it could be, right?"

Toshio gave a light laugh. In his depths, he could feel something unfamiliar vaguely stirring. "Even if there are doctors who might call a patient with brain death not dead, there aren't any who'd say a patient whose heart's dead isn't dead." Toshio said with a laugh. For no particular reason he switched his car keys to his other hand. "Her breathing and heart rate stopped, her blood pressure was zero, and her pupillary response was gone. She was dead. No room for doubt."

"But, they say suspended animation happens a lot, don't they."

Toshio gave a bitter smile. "I haven't seen too many in a state of apparent death but there are patients who look a lot like a corpse but who aren't really dead. If their heart rate is too weak, an amateur can't feel a pulse, their breath is so shallow it can look like they're not breathing at all. But, her heart had completely stopped. Anyone who's heart is stopped that long, even if they were alive, would be dead. --Well, I don't think people in suspended animation have postmortem lividity or rigor mortis either, but."

"Did you know that some are buried alive?"

Toshio laughed all the more. "I wouldn't put out a death certificate if there was even the slightest chance she was still living. I'd have performed decisive medical treatment. Even if the family tried to stop me. And, without a death certificate from me, they can't bury her."

"Then, there's no absolutely possibility at all of Shimizu-san coming back to life, right?"

Toshio burst out laughing. "If she came back to life from that state, she'd be a zombie or a vampire!" His huge laugh was one that Toshio could feel becoming stiff. (What did I just say?) He looked back at Natsuno with a smile still. "When purple spots and rigor mortis appear, it means she'd already become a plain old corpse. Things that aren't alive start to rot like that. No matter what kind of famous doctor you have on hand, once decay's started, I don't think they'd be bringing 'em back to life."

"Is that so," Natsuno murmured lost in thought. Soon he lifted his face and bowed his head. "I understand. Pardon me, asking something strange."

"By the way, you---" In spite of Toshio speaking to him, Natsuno turned away. He crossed the parking lot as if running away. "What was it, again, that had you coming to ask me that?"

Natsuno gave no answer to Toshio's question. Glancing over his shoulder he gave a faint salutation, then hurried off of the grounds.

---A zombie or a vampire!

Toshio reflected on his own words.

The patient's state, the cause of death. He thought and shook his head. (Ridiculous. He laughed bitterly at himself but as expected midway his laughter became strained and tapered off. (Impossible. Those things, they don't exist.)

--When kids are bad, an Oni comes.

Up from their graves, they came. Capturing children, taking them to a hole in the ground and devouring them.

When he was a really little kid told that by the elderly, he remembered saying two people wouldn't fit in one grave back at them. There were no Oni that rose from the grave. (

One dead, two outbreaks, one vanished.

)

(Nodes.... Marks like insect bites.) Toshio went around to the back entrance, returning to the waiting room through the staff entrance. (Bites, anemia--- death.)

One dead, two outbreaks, one vanished.

Closing the open waiting room door, Toshio showed his face in the break room.

"Nagata-san." When he called out, the nurses stopped rolling gauze and looked back. Kiyomi stood up nimbly. "Sorry but could you remake the coverage list?"

"The work schedule?"

Toshio nodded. "I know we're short on help but I've just got a bad feeling. --- We're going to be hospitalizing the wife of the Yasumoris."

Natsuno half-ran. His shadow grew long at his feet as the sun sank down into the western mountains.

(A zombie or a vampire.) The shadow looked ominous. (A corpse that can live--the dead revived.)

With that, it wasn't impossible.

Because this village still buries its dead.

Cultural Notes

Chapter 10 - 7

Onigiri

- A popular Japanese food item made of white rice clumped into a ball or triangular shape around a fish or other savory or sweet fillings, wrapped with a strip of seaweed.